

THE PEARL STRINGER



THE PEARL-STRINGER AT WORK

**THE
PEARL STRINGER**

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CHAPTER I

IT was one of those cold, cheerless days when fog and rain were battling for mastery of the air. The fog seemed to roll out of the streets like smoke. The rain fell from a heavy sky, now to be seen in zigzag lines against the background of sombre houses, now in vague, weak splutterings on the dull pavements and soggy roads.

It was as if the hosts of air and water were struggling silently for possession of a sacked city, for lights gleamed fitfully in darkened windows, the shops were deserted, the gaudy display of their big panes making as poor a show in such an atmosphere as their little rivals of mean alleys and narrow turnings. The people jostled against one another, as if they were all hurrying out of the thick of the fight, and the traffic added to the general impression of aimless haste.

It was late in the afternoon. Fog and rain had been at grips all day, first one of them apparently winning a victory, then the other. Once the sun had been seen, red and round like a dim lantern—a far camp-fire, a banner of the hosts of rain—but

a great battalion had quickly hidden his faint glory in rolling clouds of dense fog.

As night approached the battle no longer raged. The rain, gaining strength, lashed the black hordes of its enemy back into the earth, but thick, yellow fog still hung over the conquered city, drenched and clinging, the lamps glowing through it like misty torches.

All the gloom and weariness of the day seemed to gather round the window of a certain back room, in a back street, not ten minutes' walk from one of the brightest and busiest thoroughfares of the West End.

It was one of many back windows, differing in no way from its neighbours, but it seemed to Rose Leonard, as she pressed her face against the pane, the most wretched spot in the world.

She was sure of it, as sure as she was of the fact that Rose Leonard was the most unhappy, hardly-used, misunderstood, but delightfully enigmatic, girl in London.

Enigmatic! That was one of Miss Leonard's favourite words, applied to herself. She never applied it to other people. To quote her mother—Rose was always quoting her mother, consciously and unconsciously—there were not many people *she* could not see through. There was some truth in this, for the girl was undoubtedly shrewd and observant. She was no fool, for all her conceit.

Her grey eyes—the dark-rimmed iris to the big pupil made them look, at times, almost black—were hardly stronger in actual sight than the keen inward vision of her mind. There is a light that

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the human eye symbolises that is as far beyond the mental as the mental is beyond the physical—a spiritual insight and perception as rare as it is all beautiful—but Rose Leonard knew nothing, and cared less, for such fine distinctions.

Many people would have smiled at the idea of a back room in a small, but comfortable and warm, house in Colet Street being the most wretched spot on earth. Within a mile of where she stood there were slums that even this town-born, town-bred girl could not realise.

Colet Street was narrow and oddly old-fashioned, in spite of its big warehouses and bigger public-houses, the successors of old-established businesses and sordid taverns.

There were many houses left of an earlier date, with meagre little shops, dark and low-ceilinged; one or more steps at the entrances, pitfalls for unwary customers; and high, inconvenient windows to display their wares.

The road curved from right to left, reminiscent of the far-off days when perhaps it was a country lane, and the pavement was irregular, narrow at all parts, and hardly wide enough at street corners for two people to pass each other without touching.

Nearly all the shops were stamped second-hand—furniture-dealers, jewellers, clothiers—and none of them had the appearance of ever doing any trade. It was very different with the up-to-date businesses, such as the eating-house, with its great pans of potatoes, sausages, and onions behind steaming windows; the newspaper shops, gay with pictures and coloured postcards; the grocery store, sc

crowded with goods that boxes of broken biscuits were pushed right on to the pavement ; and the boot factory, where repairs were being neatly executed, as its bills proclaimed, all day long by three round-shouldered, grimy men.

Colet Street, to the casual observer, was as ordinary and uninteresting as dozens of other small streets to be found in the back-ways of the West End of London, rapidly disappearing in these days of widening roads and big buildings ; but it possessed, nevertheless, not a few suggestive and quaint characteristics.

The private houses, dropped in between the shops, were occupied by workers all more or less connected with the great body of silversmiths and jewellers, such as gilders, engravers, gold and silver chasers, watchmakers, and lapidaries.

On the private door of the shop that represented to Rose Leonard, at that particular minute, the most dreary spot on earth, were two brass plates. One was small, neat, and well polished—"Grey & Mordaunt, Pearl Stringers"; the other was so old that its engraving was as faint as the legend on a good knight's shield, dented and battered—"Professor Percy Mordaunt" appeared in the centre, and a long word, beginning with a capital L, but otherwise undecipherable, in the left-hand corner.

It was supposed to be an old curiosity shop, but the fairly good stock of old Mr. Grey, the predecessor of P. Mordaunt, whose name was painted over the window, had dwindled away since the death of its collector.

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Old Mr. Grey had lived to a great age, and as his wife had been the original pearl-worker of the firm, it will be seen that it was long established. Mrs. Grey had been assisted by one of her two daughters, who threaded her first bead when she was a fresh young girl, and was still threading as a worn, middle-aged woman. She had devoted all her life to "the stringing," sacrificing youth, strength, and eyesight to her work.

The second daughter of old Mr. and Mrs. Grey had escaped the fate of her sister by early marriage. Her family knew little of her husband, beyond the fact that he was on the stage. His name was Percy Mordaunt, and for several years after the marriage they saw nothing of him or his wife.

Old Mr. Grey, who had always thought more of his curiosities than of his children, bore the separation very equably; but the mother and sister, sitting long hours at their work, perpetually discussed the absent girl and brooded over her fate. As she had coolly walked out of the house one morning, to marry her Percy Mordaunt, so she as coolly walked in again, eight or nine years afterwards, with all her worldly possessions—an old travelling basket and many packages—outside in a four-wheeled cab, with her husband and two children looking anxiously out of the window at their future home.

Old Mr. and Mrs. Grey took them in as a matter of course. It appeared that they had met with professional reverses; Percy Mordaunt had rarely met with anything else during the whole of his professional and private career; and the family

lived very comfortably in Colet Street from that day forward.

Mrs. Mordaunt was supposed to make herself useful in the house ; her husband was supposed to assist old Mr. Grey in the shop ; her son was supposed to be sensibly educated, so as to become a wage-earner as quickly as possible ; and her little girl was supposed to be generally helpful to her aunt and grandmother. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Mordaunt was slovenly and incapable in housework ; Mr. Mordaunt only annoyed and irritated old Mr. Grey in the shop ; Master Mordaunt played in the streets when he ought to have been studying at home ; and the little girl alone fulfilled her mission.

All this, however, was ancient history. Old Mr. Grey and his wife were no more ; their unmarried daughter had taken the little niece, as soon as she left school, into her business, paying her the high compliment, after a few years, of adding the name Mordaunt to that of Grey on the brass plate upon the door.

Mr. Percy Mordaunt was nominally the master of the whole house—literally of the basement, ground floor, and attics, the best rooms being let to an old professional friend of his, Mrs. Leonard, the mother of Rose.

Rose was sitting in an old rocking-chair in the little room behind the shop. Her eyes were fixed on the big, dim window overlooking the blank, back walls of neighbouring houses ; her feet tapped smartly on the floor every time the rocking-chair swung forward ; there was a newspaper on her knees, spread open at a page devoted to women's

interests, with illustrations of impossibly tall, boneless girls extinguished by their hats.

The room was part office, part parlour, containing two big tables, one against the window and lighted by a hanging gas-branch with a green shade, the other placed near the door leading into the shop, as a sort of barrier or counter; there was an iron safe in one corner, a high stool in another; a very old bookcase with glass doors, displaying a small collection of books, the top shelves being piled with cardboard boxes, rolls of tissue-paper, a ball of twine, an empty ink-bottle, and other trifles; the floor was covered with oilcloth from which the original pattern had long disappeared in the centre, but still showed itself faintly in untrodden patches beneath tables; the window was curtainless, its old, green linen blind cracked and worn into a network of lines and creases; there was a map of London on one of the walls and a couple of old pictures over the mantelpiece—one of them a big engraving of "Jephtha's Daughter," surrounded by her maidens, sitting on a hillock, gazing pensively at the sky, the other a small picture of an armoured knight on horseback, his helmet and face sharply outlined against a clear background.

A small bowl of crocuses stood on the window-ledge, in company with a twopenny bunch of violets in a little glass vase.

On the table by the window, which was covered by a piece of green billiard-cloth, were scattered the few simple tools of Grey & Mordaunt's trade. Miss Grey was absent, but her young niece and

partner was hard at work. In front of her rested a grooved board, also covered with green cloth, on which she was arranging a quantity of artificial pearls of graduated sizes.

"It's all very well to talk, but I do think London is the most hateful place," said Rose Leonard, in the slow, drawling voice of one who has said all she has to say, so repeats herself for the sake of going on. "What's the use of its being the most wonderful city in the world? What's the use of its wealth and power and all that sort of thing to me? I might as well be living in Timbuctoo, for any advantages I get out of London. I'd rather live in Timbuctoo. I might make myself of some importance there, but here——!"

She rocked so violently at this point that the chair almost went over backwards.

"Oh, hang it!" exclaimed the girl, adding sharply to her companion—"You needn't look shocked, Nannie! I should have said much worse than that if I'd been by myself, and I should have felt better. I'm like a man, I always feel better if I let myself go and work it off."

"What do you want to work off?" asked the girl at the table, puckering her lips into shape for a whistle, but not whistling, as she deftly nipped the round, shining beads into position on her grooved board.

"Everything!" cried Rose, rising from her chair and beginning to walk stormily from the parlour into the shop and back again. "This awful depression that seizes hold of me—discontent—rage—hate of myself and everybody else. It only comes

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over me now and then, Nannie. You know how sensible I am, don't you, Nannie? You know I'm not one of those crying, silly sort of girls. I hate crying and making scenes. Yes, if there is one thing I hate more than another, it is crying and making scenes."

She stopped by the table, leaning both hands on it and stooping a little to look at her friend. The light under the green shade fell on her olive-skinned, eager face, passionate and undeveloped, with the grey eyes that looked almost black, the somewhat hard and thin lines of the well-shaped mouth, the straight nose, sharply defined jaw and chin, and the curve of a beautiful throat.

Nannie Mordaunt's fingers stopped for a minute, pressed on the edge of the board. She was only two years older than her friend, four-and-twenty, but there might have been a dozen years between them.

Nannie was so grave and self-contained. A little woman of the world—a narrow world of ways and means, of humble duties and petty cares, a world that was peopled by the few whom she loved and worked for—a very real world where she spent the long hours of her life, but not the stolen minutes of her recreation, for Nannie Mordaunt had the rare gift of imagination. It was as undeveloped as yet as her friend's beauty, but differing in that its possibilities were unknown even to herself.

She looked at Rose with a smile on her plain, thin face—Nannie had the colour and plainness of nearly all sandy-haired, pale-eyed girls—and shook her head a little doubtfully.

"That's one of your delusions, Rose," she said.

"You're very fond of making scenes, although you don't often cry. Think it over for a minute. Isn't it the truth?"

Rose thought it over, came to the same conclusion, but gave vent to a violent denial.

"No! You don't understand me in the least if you think I enjoy being wretched!" she exclaimed.

"I didn't say that," rejoined Nannie, going on with her work.

"What have I got to live for?" said Rose, returning to the main point. "We're wretchedly poor, mother and I. We have no friends and no relatives."

"Oh, Rose!"

"As good as none! You know that mother's too proud to know her family, and father's family is too proud to know us. There you are! We're between two stools. I'm not a lady—you know what people mean by a lady—and yet I'm not absolutely common. That comes of people marrying out of their class. If father hadn't married mother——"

"It's rather late in the day to trouble about that, isn't it?" asked the pearl stringer.

Rose could not help smiling.

"Perhaps it is," she admitted, "But I am the sufferer, after all, so I can't forget it. I'm ambitious. I want to make the most of my life. I want to get it all in! I want—I want—they're not real, are they?"

She broke off in the middle of her wants, pointing to the large pearls in a graduated row on the board.

"Oh, no. Look at them!" answered Nannie Mordaunt,

"They look very beautiful to me," said Rose, sitting down by the table, her elbows resting upon it, her moody eyes on the pearls. "They are a fine colour and very shiny."

"Yes, but there is no true lustre," said her friend, placing one of the beads in her palm; "They're a good imitation, but anybody can see they're artificial."

"How?" asked Rose. "You're not a very good judge, are you, Nannie? I mean, you're not an expert. Who taught you to distinguish between real and artificial pearls?"

"Nobody taught me," rejoined Nannie, "but I've handled them for nearly ten years, you know. Aunt says my eyes have got properly trained, that's all."

"Ten years!" exclaimed Rose Leonard, a fact that she well knew suddenly striking her with new force. "To think that you've sat in this gloomy little room, day in and day out, looking at bricks and mortar, stringing pearls for other women to wear and enjoy, for ten years! What a life! What a girlhood, Nannie!"

With an impulse of quick, demonstrative affection she sprang to her feet and threw her arms round the other's neck, then, taking her friend's face between her hands, she turned it up towards the light, studying it with a curious, wondering expression.

"Don't you feel the dullness of it all? Aren't you weary of the long sameness of the days? Don't you long for change and excitement, and pleasure and happiness? At the least, don't you long for rest?"

The vibrating voice softened on the last word, her

mood changing from young passion to young melancholy. Before Nannie Mordaunt could reply, she burst out again.

"You must feel half dead—buried alive in this dreary place! Oh, I know it's your duty, I know you've got to earn your living, I know you might be worse off—I acknowledge all that. I can see it for myself, but I can't see any compensations. Show them to me, Nan. Tell me your secret. My own life is hard and dull enough, but yours——!"

She could not find words to express the mingled pity and contempt she felt for the other's habitual patience. "Sluggish indifference" she called it in her own mind, but even her thoughts changed insensibly in her friend's presence, and became more tolerant and gentle.

The pearl stringer returned her gaze for half a minute, little moved by her vehemence; then her expression changed and she turned her pale-blue eyes up towards the glimpse of heavy sky above the blank wall of the adjoining houses.

A smile curved her lips, grave and sweet, but whimsical too, and then her eyelids nearly closed. Strange, illusive, misty thoughts passed through her mind. She breathed the faint air—she heard the faint echo of unheard melody—of a dreamer of dreams.

"I think you live in a fairy world of your own," said Rose Leonard.

"I don't live in it," answered Nannie Mordaunt, swiftly returning to her work, "but I slip through the gates now and then."

She laughed a little at her own thoughts,

"It's a very strange fairy world, dear. I'm afraid you wouldn't care about it."

"Are there any men?" asked Rose, bluntly.

"Yes, men and girls, and children and old ladies, all sorts of people!"

"I don't know that I care about men," continued Rose, pursuing her own thoughts. "They're abominably selfish, mother says, and born tyrants. Not that it matters to me. I shall never get a chance to be married. All the fellows at our office are much too ancient, or mere cubs, and I never speak to any other men, except Mr. Challis, and your father, and Perth. Perth's the only eligible one, and he's only sixteen, isn't he? Well, I must wait for Perth."

Rose had recovered her good temper. She took up her hat and coat from the place where she had thrown them down, on returning from her work earlier in the afternoon, and moved towards the door.

"Good-bye, Nannie!" she said. "I don't expect I shall be down again. Are you going to work all night?"

"Oh, no, I've only got to finish this necklace. They're going to call for it at eight o'clock. Good night, dearest!"

She leaned back in her chair with her face upturned. Rose came forward, gave her a careless kiss, and went out of the room.

Nannie Mordaunt looked after her fondly and admiringly. Then she pulled the shaded gas-jet a little lower, cut some long strands of white silk, deftly twisted a piece of fine wire into the shape of a needle, and began to string the artificial pearls.

CHAPTER II

THE sitting-room of the Mordaunt family, in Colet Street, was in the basement. Once a stranger, who had not called upon Mrs. Mordaunt before, had been guilty of calling it a front kitchen. She had never been asked to repeat her visit.

Approached by a flight of steep stairs, it was essentially a room for a winter evening, when one could forget, in the glow of fire and gaslight, that there were such things as light and sunshine.

The walls were hung with old, dark pictures, valueless for the most part, which old Mr. Grey had bought at auction sales. The furniture was oddly assorted; there were several plain wooden chairs, and two or three with fine spindle legs and faded silk cushions. A big round table was placed in the centre of the floor, its chief object being to prevent unwary visitors knocking their heads against the old-fashioned chandelier. There were pieces of cocoanut matting in front of the hearth and before the piano, and a wide strip reaching from door to window, the remainder of the floor being covered with linoleum, like the office upstairs.

There were several framed photographs, fading

with age, of Professor Percy Mordaunt in the days of his active service in his profession, and a large oil painting in which he was depicted as a naval officer, with a large-headed doll on his knee, the artist having added to the general effectiveness of his work by painting huge guns, discharging cannon, on either side of a funnel belching enough black smoke to suggest that the ship was on fire. In the photographs Percy Mordaunt was in evening clothes, with his sleeves rolled to the elbow, surrounded by the paraphernalia of his art. It is almost needless to add that he had been a conjurer and ventriloquist—known as "Professor" in the former branch of the profession, and as "Lieutenant" in the latter—for all conjurers and ventriloquists of the old school were identical in style and manner. The undecipherable word on the brass door-plate was "Legerdemain."

The door-plate and the oil painting were alike records of his prosperous days. It was long since he had pocketed a professional fee, but he still lived in hope of a return to work, and always spoke of the years he had lived in Colet Street as "resting on his oars."

Mrs. Mordaunt shared the belief, so did Nannie, in all the simplicity of her heart, but the Professor was not so sure of the loyalty of his son and heir.

Master Mordaunt was of an extremely silent not to say sulky disposition. He bore the uncommon first name of Perthshire, in consequence of having arrived upon the scene of his mortal struggles, when his parents were touring in Scotland, almost as unexpectedly as coloured silk handker-

chiefs appeared in the linings of gentlemen's hats at his father's entertainments.

Eight years younger than his sister, he was utterly unlike her in appearance and character.

The law of heredity was proved in Master Mordaunt in a most extraordinary manner. There was a family legend that he conjured with a rattle in his cradle, and it is a fact that nothing interested him so much in early childhood as his father's tricks. He invented the most cunning devices to get hold of the vanishing bird-cage, the magic wand, or the fictitious eggs that played so important a part in the Professor's performances. The first words that he lisped were disjointed phrases of his parent's platform patter.

Master Perth, on reaching school age, quickly mastered the various pitch-and-toss tricks with coins that were popular at the time with his young companions, frequently contriving to manœuvre halfpence from his friends' pockets to his own. He was a tall, black-browed youth, with big, roving eyes—eyes with no depth in them, dark and shallow—and a crop of lank, black hair.

When Nannie went downstairs, having finished stringing the artificial pearls, she found the other members of the family in the sitting-room.

Her aunt had returned and was having a make-shift meal at one side of the table. Mrs. Mordaunt, reading a novel from the free library, sat as close to the fire as she could without burning her shoes and stockings. They were always scorched. Professor Mordaunt was engaged in transferring clippings of newspapers from an old scrap-book

to a new one. Perth sat in a corner by himself, practising sleight-of-hand tricks with an old pack of cards. He was the only one who did not greet Nannie with a word of welcome.

"Well, dearie, have you finished Solomon's job?" asked her aunt.

"How tired you look! I've no patience with working overtime. Come and have a warm," said her mother, moving her chair about an inch to one side.

"Join the family circle, m' dear!" said her father.

The girl knelt down in front of the fire for a few minutes, caressed the cat that was curled into a flattened ball on the cocoanut matting, and warmed her hands. Then she rose and stooped over the table beside her father.

"How are you getting on, dad?"

"Excellently, Nannie, excellently! If only I was not tempted to read the extracts as I go along."

"Can't you resist the temptation, dad?" she asked, with an affectionate smile.

He shook his head doubtfully and stirred the paste round and round in a cracked china bowl.

The Professor gave one the impression of a man who had shrunk in parts, as if he had been badly washed; for instance, his smooth, shiny, black hair looked like a wig that was too small for his round, big head; the flesh had withered from his face, giving the big, protruding eyes a peculiarly glassy, staring appearance; his small mouth was completely hidden under a wiry, but sweeping moustache; even his clothes hung loosely on a spare figure that suggested a broad, upright body, also

dwindling away. He wore an old velveteen jacket, frogged with faded blue cord, and a big carbuncle pin at his open shirt collar.

"It's very gratifying, m' dear, to take a peep into this sort of thing," he said, turning over the leaves of the scrap-book, filled with press clippings, advertisements cut out of newspapers, hand bills, programmes, and other records of the Professor's career.

"It must be very gratifying, dad."

"I wonder whether you've ever noticed this little bit, Nannie—where is it again? I had it in my hand a minute ago." He selected a piece of crumpled paper, smoothed it out and read the words applying to himself in rapid tones: "'Professor Percy Mordaunt, past master of the art of legerdemain—er—er—most amusing patter—not a hint of vulgarity—produced a lively rabbit from a lady's muff, the little rodent evidently enjoying the Professor's witticisms—modern magician!'"

The Professor proudly folded up the piece of paper and hunted for another.

"Here they say the audience was spell-bound," he went on, eagerly. "I recollect this particular evening well. We were under the distinguished patronage of the Mayor and Mayoress. His worship was kind enough to send a message for me to be presented to him afterwards. I recollect that the Mayoress asked for a reduction in the tickets, because she had brought such a large party of children. Very pleasant recollections indeed—I don't mean reducing the price of the tickets, but the presentation to their worships."

He flicked the leaves of the scrap-book with his bony, flexible fingers—the conjurer's hand never loses its flexibility—picking out a sentence here and there.

“ ‘Worthy successor of the ancient wonder-workers’—Isle of white paper. ‘Well acquainted with every sleight known in the profession’—that’s from a trade journal. ‘Best conjurer we have ever seen’—small town in Somerset. ‘Professor Mordaunt is unique,’ London Daily Press. Perhaps that’s the gem, Nannie!” exclaimed her father, shutting the scrap-book with a bang. “I remember having those words printed on my cards—‘Professor Mordaunt is unique, *vide* London Daily Press.’”

“I suppose it was an important paper said that, dad?” asked the girl.

“M—yes! Oh, yes, m’ dear,” he replied. “It was undoubtedly important, but hardly sufficiently well known to impress the general public, so I thought it more discreet to use the comprehensive words ‘London Daily Press’”; the Professor pulled down his shirt cuffs and coughed impressively. “As a matter of fact, that particular criticism appeared in the columns of a local paper published at Bethnal Green. *Entre nous*, m’ dear, *entre nous*.”

His daughter, who firmly believed in her father’s past glories, looked at him admiringly.

She knew the phrase, “Professor Mordaunt is unique,” as well as she knew the alphabet, but it gave her a peculiar pleasure that was half pain to hear him talk of the old days. If only he had had more energy, or better opportunities, she was sure he would have made a fortune, for he was so clever!

She had never outgrown her childish wonder at his little tricks of sleight-of-hand. The box where he kept his simple mechanical appliances was still a source of mystery, not to be touched lightly, rather alarming, in point of fact.

Mrs. Mordaunt, having finished her novel and pronounced it rubbish, began to turn over a work-basket piled with stockings and socks to be darned.

Nannie sat down to help her, while Miss Grey, the quiet aunt, carried her tray of tea-things into the scullery, returned, put on her spectacles, and sat down to copy out one of Eliza Cook's poems. She was very fond of Eliza Cook and Mrs. Hemans, and filled many copybooks with favourite extracts from their works ; no one knew her object in doing this, unless it was in the hope that it would assist her in committing them to memory. Sometimes she would repeat a stray verse to Nannie when they were at work, but she rarely mentioned the subject at other times.

"That Mrs. Leonard is a caution !" said Mrs. Mordaunt, suddenly.

"Why, mother ?" asked Nannie, as she quickly threw up a wool scaffolding, as it were, across a huge hole in the heel of one of Perth's socks.

"She came downstairs for a cup of tea at half past four, when your pa and I were having ours, because her toothache was so bad ; at five she wanted some hot water to bathe her face, and just before you left off working she sent Rose to borrow my smelling-salts, although she's sniffed all the smell out of 'em long ago."

"She seems a martyr to the toothache, poor thing!" observed the Professor.

"Oh, I've no patience!" exclaimed his wife. "Why don't she go to a dentist? I've talked to her till I'm tired, and so has Rose."

"I think Mrs. Leonard is rather nervous and sensitive," said Nannie, compassionately.

"That's all very well," said Mrs. Mordaunt, passing her needle to her daughter to thread, "but if your teeth ache, you ought to have them pulled out."

"It needs a little courage and determination," began Nannie.

"Oh, I've no patience!" repeated her mother—it was her favourite expression, and, unlike many favourite expressions, was strictly true. "If you broke your leg, I suppose you'd have it cut off, wouldn't you?"

"I think I should have it set, m' dear," said the Professor, timidly.

"Would you!" snapped Mrs. Mordaunt. "And if you got you head chopped off, I suppose you'd go and have that set?"

"The cases are hardly analogous, m' dear," said the Professor, abstractedly stirring the paste round and round as if it were a cup of tea.

"Don't talk to me about being nervous and sensitive!" said his wife, suddenly pouncing on Nannie. "I'd like to know what would become of you all if I took to being nervous and sensitive."

"I'm sure I can't imagine, mother dear," said Nannie.

If there was a little innocent flattery in her voice

there was no irony. Her mother was mollified. She was fond of little domestic storms, gusts of ill temper, or wordy skirmishes, but her daughter could usually make peace.

Perth, during all this conversation, had been doggedly practising his card tricks. He occasionally whistled softly to himself, but only at such minutes as his "sleights" were successful. It was not until Mrs. Mordaunt broke up the party with the word "Supper" that he rose from his chair, yawned, and shook himself.

"What cheer, Nan!" he said to his sister, as if she had just come into the room.

"How have you got on, Perth?" was her answer.

He pushed his lank black hair back from his face and shook his head, doubtfully.

"I don't seem to make much headway, Nan."

"You're such a severe critic of yourself."

"Quite right, m' dear. Perth works too hard. None of us can attain perfection. Wait till you've studied legerdemain as long as your father, my boy," said the Professor, with the dignity of a master of his art.

Perth relapsed into low muttering, indistinct and disrespectful, and did not speak again that night except to speculate gloomily, at supper, on the age of the cheese.

Some time after the others had gone upstairs to bed, Nannie went to the slip of a room, with a sloping roof, where her brother slept. She tapped softly and he opened the door at once. She saw that he had not begun to undress.

"What cheer, Nan!" he said.

That was his usual greeting. She judged his mood by the tone in which he said it.

"Is there any news, dear?" she asked, entering the room.

"Yes, there's news," he answered, bluntly. "I've got an answer from those people in the North. I got it from *The Era* office to-day. They will take me on. I start next week."

"Oh, Perth!"

Her face flushed with excitement, in strange contrast to the unemotional boy. He put a clipping from *The Era* and a letter into her hand. She sat down by the chest of drawers, that served for a dressing-table, and read them both eagerly. The former was headed "Wanted," and offered an engagement to a smart young man in a small entertainment company on tour. Nannie knitted her brows over it.

"'Variety and fit-up,'" she read. "What does that mean, Perth?"

"Sometimes they appear in music-halls and sometimes on their own account," he answered, briefly.

The smart young man was required to be strictly sober, have a slight knowledge of stage illusions, and be willing to make himself generally useful.

"You are rather young, Perth," said his sister.

"I told them I was eighteen. I had to stretch a point."

"Did they ask whether you had had any experience?" she asked next.

"Yes, I had to stretch another point. In fact, I made up quite a good little story."

"Oh, Perth!"

He gave no answer to her exclamation of protest, but a set dogged expression came into his face that she knew well, and dreaded.

"I am sure they will be pleased with you," she said. "When have you arranged to join these people?"

He pointed to the letter which he had given her with the newspaper clipping. She unfolded a big sheet, with a printed heading. It was from the manager and proprietor of the Wonder-Workers, who thanked Mr. Perth Mordaunt for his favour of even date, accepted his offer to give his services gratis for a fortnight, regretting he was unable to meet his views *re* payment of a part of his railway fare, and begged to state that "The W. W.s opened as above on the following Monday." The letter was dated from a town in the North, and the writer signed himself—"Your's truly, Geo. Hammond (The Headless Man)."

"The Headless Man?" said Nannie, in a puzzled voice.

"I suppose that's his special illusion," explained her brother. "Well, Nan, what do you say?"

She hesitated, looking at the boy with eyes that were suddenly bright with tears. Then she rose and put her arm timidly round his neck.

"I wish from the bottom of my heart, Perth, that you would tell father and mother."

"Oh, we settled that weeks ago!" he answered, impatiently, but not roughly, pushing away her

arm. "You can tell them fast enough when I've gone. Nothing they could say would stop me going, and they've neither of 'em got enough backbone to try force. I know I'm young and raw," he went on, with unusual vehemence, "but I'm old enough to know my own mind, and I won't stick here any longer. I'm sick of the place, I'm sick of my job at the office, I'm sick of the sight of all of you!"

His boyish passion died out as suddenly as it had started. He grasped his sister's hands.

"Look here, Nan! You're not going to back out of your promise, are you?" he said. "You'll lend me the money, won't you?"

"I didn't promise you the money to go away from home, or deceive father and mother," she answered, gravely. "You told me it was to study stage illusions, and that sort of thing, at some place in London."

"Oh, well, you should have found out for yourself before you promised," he said, roughly. "You're such a simpleton!"

"I am not going to break my promise, Perth," she said, "but I almost wish you had chosen some other work. Conjuring is so uncertain. Look at dad——"

"Yes, look at dad!" interrupted the boy. "No wonder he was a failure. He hasn't got the grit to succeed, even if he hadn't got married and lost his money. Catch me losing my money when I've earned it! Catch me getting married!"

"Well, not yet," said his sister, with a smile.

"Never!" said the boy, with the decision of

sixteen. "What's the sense in getting married? Before you know where you are, p'raps in a couple of years, you've got half a dozen kids on your hands!"

Nannie laughed outright. He instantly relapsed into his usual sulky silence. She looked grave again.

"So I am to break the news to father and mother when you have run away, Perth?" she asked.

"Do as you like! I shall be gone, I don't care!" he answered, carefully folding and putting away the letter from the manager of the Wonder Workers.

"You'll be sorry to go, won't you, Perth? You'll think of us at home, sometimes, and write to us now and then?" asked Nannie, wistfully.

"Oh, yes, of course I'll think of you, and write when I've got time. Cheer up, Nan! You wait till I've made my fortune."

He allowed her to kiss him on the cheek and even dabbed her eyes, rather roughly, half playfully, with the cuff of his jacket. Then he softly opened the door and she slipped away, but a doubt still lingered in his mind and he called her back.

"Nan! You're not going to split, are you? You're going to let me have the money, all of it you can spare? You'll send me some more, won't you?"

"Yes, Perth," she answered, a little sadly, "I promised."

CHAPTER III

THERE are people who travel far and fast in imagination. Suggest a new thought, or an old one for the matter of that, and they joyfully leave the realms of fact behind them. They are in a world of dreams on the instant.

The impossible, vague glories of Castles in Spain will materialise, in the mind's eye, at the glance of a stranger, the notes of an old song, or the breath of a summer evening. The scent of a violet takes one into the murmuring woods; a whiff of spicy perfume is the essence to another of the mysteries of far Eastern lands; the walls of an old house, or the mossy paths of a familiar garden, will lift the weight of years and restore the days of childhood.

Rose Leonard was a girl of fancy, in spite of her talk of sterling common sense. But her fancy had a material foundation. It had all to do with personal desires: money, clothes, jewels; gifts for her friends and herself.

It was one of her great pleasures to go shopping, not to buy, for she had no money, but to examine the shop windows, speculate on prices, and choose the possessions she could never possess. The whole business was an elaboration of a child's game—"Let's pretend!"

Putting on her best hat and autumn coat, she generally began her shopping in Tottenham Court Road.

First she bought a penny bunch of violets, untwisted the tight bit of bass round their stalks and arranged them more loosely, before they were fastened into her coat. Then she began a keen inspection of the shop windows, turning her face towards the West and slowly making her way to Oxford Circus, and from Oxford Circus to Marble Arch.

In fancy she arrayed herself in every frock, tried on all the hats, bought gloves by the dozen, fitted her pretty feet into the most impossible shoes, and hid her guinea coat under Russian sables or silver fox.

The jewellers' windows held her captive for perhaps the longest time. The pearls always made her think of Nannie Mordaunt, but she found little attraction in their soft lustre. The cold, flashing diamonds, or big rubies and emeralds, were far more to her taste. She turned into Bond Street and Regent Street, in passing, to see finer jewels than Oxford Street could boast.

She paid little heed to the people, except to notice the dresses of ladies going in and out of shops, for she was absolutely indifferent at this time of her life to all but her personal interests. She saw no humour or pathos in the motley crowd of buyers and sellers. She heard no irony in the shrill cry of a wretchedly poor woman at the edge of the kerb, who was selling penny toys—" 'Ere y'are! lots o' fun for us all!" She did not notice

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the peculiar greeting of a couple of taxi drivers who met and parted with the words :

"'Ullo, me o' partic'lar ! 'Ow goes it ?"

"Oh, 'umpty !"

The streets, to her, were all shop window. She was as oblivious of the ever-changing sky over her head as of the earth under the pavement.

Once she stopped for several minutes, at the corner of a side street, to listen to a deformed boy playing on a square wooden violin of his own make, and added a penny to the three halfpence in the cap upon the ground, in front of the little stool where he crouched, deplorable and grotesque, touching and absurd, making music.

At Marble Arch, having bought herself in imagination a perfect trousseau, Rose crossed the wide labyrinth of roads into Hyde Park.

The sun had set, but the sky was still rosy, although the sombre clouds of night were drifting slowly towards the West.

She was not attracted by the flower beds in the distance, glowing like autumn fires with purple and yellow chrysanthemums, Michaelmas daisies and scarlet berries, but strolled over the gravel to where there were several little groups of people listening to speeches.

Rose was always amused and interested in Hyde Park oratory. She never pushed her way into a crowd, but listened on the outskirts. Still childish, ignorant, undeveloped, she hoped to hear some words of wisdom, to be helped in her vain, half-awakened thoughts of life and religion, but mingled with this hope was a feeling of contempt for the

obvious poverty and failure in life of many of the speakers.

There were very few orators on this particular afternoon, and only one of them was mounted on a box, frequently mentioned as "this platform"; the others were holding discussions, in a more intimate manner, with little knots of men on the gravel path.

Standing on tiptoe, to peer over the bent heads of the interested listeners, Rose discovered that the biggest of the groups surrounded a man whom she knew well by sight—a wrinkled, roguish, fluent old fellow, of free tongue and native wit, who was arguing with a nervous, hungry-eyed youth of twenty on the doctrines of early Christianity, both of them misquoting the Fathers of the Church as if they were their intimate friends.

In the centre of a second group was another well-known frequenter of Free Speech Corner—a glib young man whose words poured out with never a pause longer than a comma; a wind-bag of a young man, slovenly in appearance, shrewd and offensive in repartee, amazingly well read as far as quantity was concerned, and possessed of an imperturbably good temper.

Rose met his eyes as she peered over the shoulders of his audience and instantly turned away. She waited for an even shorter time to listen to a dull speaker who was defying his hearers—five or six small boys and a young nurse-girl with a baby—to rationally define transubstantiation.

Then she became really interested in the man

standing on the box. He spoke well, if a little pedantically, pleading for Individualism, as opposed to Socialism. The people listened indifferently, held by his good manner and clever tongue more than by the arguments he used.

An earnest, but vague, Socialist, at the back of the crowd, occasionally interrupted the speech by a badly worded, but pertinent, remark. The orator ignored him until a loud voice, from the same direction, suddenly demanded fair play.

"Order! Order!" said the anti-Socialist. "What has fair play got to do with my point? Let the gentleman put his question at the end of the meeting."

"'Ear! 'Ear!" said a big, judicial man, without a collar, in the front row.

"When are you going to end the meeting? To-morrow morning?" asked the same loud voice.

There was a general laugh, for the orator was decidedly long-winded, with a tendency to prose.

"I don't wish to argue with you, my lad," he said, pointing to a very young man standing by the Socialist. "You had better run away and play marbles."

The laugh this time was against the owner of the loud voice, but he joined in it good-naturedly and pushed his way to the front.

Short, thin, but well knit; bare-headed, and with his hands thrust into the pockets of his loose jacket, there was a look of peculiar independence, cleanliness, and buoyancy about him. He was not handsome, but distinctly attractive; absolutely self-possessed, not to say insolent in look and bear-

ing—a breezy young man—he placed himself in front of everybody else, quite close to the platform, and nodded to the orator as if they were old friends. If there was something affected and showy in his manner, a touch of the actor making his first entrance, it was lost on the little crowd.

"Now, sir!" said the orator, witheringly, and taking no notice of the youth's friendly salutation. "Perhaps you'd like to take possession of this platform?"

"With pleasure, if you'll step down," answered the youth.

The orator retorted scornfully, and the usual skirmish that takes place on such occasions showed that his opponent was well worth powder and shot. The indifference of the crowd changed to amused approbation.

The young man was evidently a Socialist, but not of a pronounced type. There was no earnestness or enthusiasm in his face or manner; he seemed to have entered the fight for the sake of fighting, but he used the weapon of a sharp tongue with skill and occasional humour, aptly seconded by the man in whose defence he had first spoken.

The orator had little chance between them, for the original interrupter prompted the youth, who turned every muttered word into a stinging sentence. He still smiled, with a flush of colour in his boyish face, and kept his hands in his pockets, except when he pushed back his hair now and again, for it was rather long and wavy. His hands were well kept, but short-fingered and thick.

After a while, by general acclamation, he mounted

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the box, ungraciously relinquished by the Anti-Socialist, but directly he did so his attraction for the audience began to wane. His speech was full of the commonplaces of a man who speaks by rote, rather than inspiration. One felt that he was putting a case to the best of his ability, but without holding any strong personal opinions.

The usual catch-words came easily enough to his lips—"economic conditions," "exploiting the workers," "greed of the capitalist class," and so on—but he did not express himself, in spite of his obvious desire to please, with any conviction. He lost his self-possession with the interest of his hearers.

His face changed, the bright, attractive smile giving place to a nervous, irritable expression; even his shoulders drooped, and his head hung forward.

He met the fate, at the hands of the little mob, of any popular speaker who disappoints and fails his once-loyal followers.

"This is no good after all!" said the Socialist whom he had befriended.

"He's what I call——" the judicial man without a collar hesitated for a sufficiently scathing word—"a flippiant tumbug!" he concluded, calmly.

There was a demand, from the back of the crowd, for the original orator. Once more the young fellow on the box flushed boyishly, but with anger this time, and ended his poor speech hurriedly and ineffectively. Then he jumped down and pushed his way through the people without another word.

A few looked over their shoulders ; there was a jibe or two thrown after him, but he was soon forgotten in the pent-up eloquence of his late opponent.

Rose Leonard had watched the whole scene with intense curiosity and strange absorption. The young stranger interested, surprised, and captivated her imagination. His fleeting look of physical beauty, when he stood erect with his bare head held high, combined with the strong, compelling quality of his voice, had filled her with the passionate, innocent admiration rarely put into words, but never entirely absent, that any man in his youth and strength awakens in dawning womanhood.

She had hardly noticed what he said. It satisfied her to look at him, to hear him, and when he began to fail she was conscious of an exaggerated pity and regret, absurd enough in the circumstances, but none the less real and sincere.

She was not a susceptible girl as a rule, far less sentimental and foolish than the majority of girls ; but strange, subtle emotion swept over her as she watched him. He was so eloquent, so earnest, so brilliant ! She could not judge him with the coolness of a throng of men. She hated them all. They jeered at him. They did not understand him. They hounded him away.

Obedying the thoughtless impulse of the minute, Rose edged her way out of the crowd and followed slowly, but decidedly, in the footsteps of the youth

If only she dared to speak to him ! She raged,

inwardly, at her own fears and conventionality. It would be so sweet to express her sympathy. What would he say? What would he think of her?

She observed that, directly he had left the Marble Arch crowd behind, his bearing changed once more. He lifted his head and squared his shoulders. Rose divined, without seeing his face, that he was rapidly recovering from his petty chagrin. She was glad of it—comforted, touched by his evident mastery of himself—and her own mood changed at the same time. She was a little amused at herself, a trifle ashamed of what she had done.

Our follies, fortunately, are secrets well kept. Rose would have confessed to many faults before acknowledging that she had deliberately followed an unknown man in Hyde Park. It was very ridiculous, and every minute increased her wonder at herself, but she still followed him.

All the rosy colour had faded out of the sky. A chilly wind sprang up. The gravel path was darkened by the flick of rain.

The stranger suddenly turned on to the grass and took shelter under a tree. Rose, making for an exit gate that she saw in the distance, was obliged to pass him.

She was almost running. She had drawn her skirts tightly together in one hand, grasping her little shabby umbrella in the other. Her cheeks were wet, for the flick of rain rapidly developed into a steady downpour. She turned her head and looked at him boldly.

There was room for two in the shelter of the tree. Another minute and she would have been standing beside him; but the glance that met hers—the instant recognition of a pretty girl—the invitation of a smile and a beckoning hand—gave her a shock of surprise.

She was near enough to plainly see his face, and she knew the expression well. She had seen it again and again, on the faces of men in West End streets, as she went home from her work at night.

Her own eyes became blank—the eyes of the London girl who can take care of herself and knows what it means to encounter the covert insult, or the daring approach, that she instinctively recognises and repels.

Gladly and gratefully, bewildered and enraged, she turned out of the quiet park into the shelter of the busy streets.

CHAPTER IV

AFTER her unaccountable folly and disillusion in Hyde Park—Rose did not spare herself—the girl went home in a very uncertain temper. There was no more imaginary shopping for her that day. She felt weary and dispirited.

Colet Street looked particularly dull and uninteresting. She entered the house, according to her usual custom, by the shop door. Nannie Mordaunt and the quiet aunt were finishing their day's work by gaslight. She spoke at once on the subject of latest and greatest interest in the house.

"Any more news of Perth?"

It was a week since Perth Mordaunt had run away.

"Yes!" said Nannie, looking up eagerly at the sound of her friend's voice. "He sent us a picture postcard. Isn't it good of him to think of us again so soon? It was only the day before yesterday we had his letter."

"Cost him a ha'penny, didn't it?" said Rose, looking carelessly at the picture postcard on the mantelpiece.

The bright smile of pleasure faded out of Nannie's face. She went on threading a string of seed pearls without answering.

"Well, I'm glad he is getting on," said Rose, quickly. "It must be splendid to begin a new life, with everything changed about one. New scenes, new friends, new clothes!"

"I don't expect Perth will get any new clothes for a long while," said Nannie, shaking her head rather ruefully.

"No, but he's a boy, and clothes don't matter to a boy," said Rose, "I was thinking of how I should feel myself in his position."

She went out of the room as she spoke, and made her way slowly to the first floor.

A fretful voice greeted her entrance of the front room.

"Is that you, Rose? At last! Where have you been all this time?"

Her mother was lying on the sofa, straining her eyes over a newspaper.

Mrs. Leonard was a haggardly thin woman, still young, with a quantity of black hair, adorned with a comb of artificial diamonds and turquoise. She wore a faded blue teagown, trimmed with lace, and much-worn velvet slippers. Her eyes, large and lustrous, were so dark that they seemed to shadow the whole face, making the beholder forget everything else. Her nose was too large and her thin-lipped mouth too wide for beauty; her skin was sallow, and her noticeably long throat so small that a big hand could have clasped it. She always wore her dresses cut low to display her throat.

Mrs. Leonard, in her childhood, had earned her own living and helped to support her parents by dancing. She had been thoroughly well trained

at one of the big variety theatres in London where ballets were given.

Strikingly pretty as a girl, she left the ballet when she was nineteen, to sing in the chorus of a musical comedy, with the hope that was never fulfilled of being able to win her way to leading parts.

Shrewd and ambitious, she quickly adapted herself to her new surroundings, successfully apeing the manners and speech of girls who were better educated and—on the surface at all events—better bred than herself. It was not long before she was perfectly at home in that peculiar, Bohemian, extravagant world of musical comedy that apes, in its turn, the larger world that is called Smart—a world that is always gay and irresponsible, where poor relations are not admitted by the young women or any relations at all by the young men; a world that is hard to describe; to call it respectable would be absurd; to use the word disreputable would be untrue—shall we say it holds a skilful balance between the two? On the whole, a very amusing, good-natured, generous, flippant world, not without its comedies and tragedies, its love stories, and its struggles for power and place.

It was in this world, without any formal introduction, that the ex-ballet girl met her future husband. It was love at first sight on his side, at second or third on hers; they were engaged for three weeks and married within as many months.

Henry Leonard, a frank, impetuous boy of twenty-two, quickly discovered that the hardships of life began with the end of the honeymoon. His

own people acknowledged, and ignored, Mrs. Leonard. He gradually drifted away from all his old friends and associations. Unable to pursue his career—he had been intended for the Army—it was inevitable that he should turn towards the profession in which his wife was absorbed—the stage.

The young couple were soon swept into the dead sea of the theatrical world, long tours with poor companies, their one hope and aim in life being expressed in the slang phrase, "a joint in the smalls," meaning parts for them both in the same play.

Their only child, Rose, was born in the third year of the marriage. Mrs. Leonard never seemed to recover her good health or spirits. Poverty and anxiety weighed her down. She was always brooding on the faded glories of her youth, having persuaded herself that an imprudent marriage was alone responsible for the loss of her beauty, the failure of her voice, and all the habits of indolence and depression that had changed her from a pretty girl into a haggard, worn-out woman.

She did not quarrel actively with her husband, but they no longer made any effort to obtain joint engagements. The little girl lived with her mother. Her earliest recollections were of provincial lodgings, long journeys in trains, and occasional visits to her grandparents in London, when Mrs. Leonard was out of work.

She only saw her father occasionally, but loved him with all her passionate little heart. He was so kind and gentle; he made her little toys out of match-boxes and sheets of note paper; he took

her for rides on top of omnibuses ; he told her long, rambling stories ; he never struck her, or pulled her hair, as her mother often did in fits of temper.

She was only ten years old when they told her he was dead, but no impression of Rose's after-life was so strong as the remembrance of her poor young father. It never left her. She dreamed of him vividly when she was a woman. She could have drawn his portrait, given an artist's skill, as truthfully in every detail thirty years after his body was dust as if she had seen him yesterday.

She rarely spoke of him, for her constancy of affection would have seemed to most people exaggerated and impossible, but he was as much a part of her life, interwoven into all her thoughts and emotions, as if he were still to be seen with her eyes or touched by her hand.

Mrs. Leonard had gradually lost touch with her old friends on the stage, losing her opportunities with the loss of youth and beauty. She gave dancing lessons and taught singing, her small income being supplemented by Rose's earnings.

Rose was a girl of ambition and resource, always self-reliant and independent. She had made the most of her board-school training, passed the different standards as smartly as a soldier marching through an enemy's conquered flags, and owed her real education to the interest taken by her school-mistress in a girl who was always neat, prompt, and enthusiastic.

This mistress, sadly handicapped in her work by the bigness of her class, was a woman of singularly firm and sweet disposition, sympathetic, absorbed

in her occupation, unusually broad-minded and capable.

Rose idealised her, after the manner of the school-girl; they walked and talked together, the mistress lent her books, and taught her to make her own clothes.

Rose earned her first wages, after leaving school, behind the counter of a very small drapery establishment, kept by a Mr. Herbert Pash, in a back street in Notting Hill. It was one of those hopeless, dull, peculiar little shops to be found in London suburbs, but disappearing as quickly as the old hansom cabs.

There were two other young ladies employed by Mr. Pash, and they "lived in." All the young ladies were under seventeen years of age, but they were requested to turn up their hair, and the counter luckily concealed the shortness of their frocks.

Mr. Pash, hungry-eyed and prematurely old, marched up and down the small shop with all the dignity and masterfulness of a West End shop-walker. It was only a couple of years since he had endowed Mrs. Pash with all his worldly goods, and she now spent her life in the underground kitchen, in company with the baby and the cat, cooking for "the staff" and for two sets of lodgers.

Before Rose had been in the house a week she realised, unlike the other young ladies, the humour and pathos of the situation. It moved her to passionate pity to see Mrs. Pash, once such a pretty, light-hearted girl—she had been a pupil of Mrs. Leonard—over-worked and underfed, with her tiny, fretful baby perpetually at her breast. It

amused her equally to hear Mr. Pash, on the entrance of a customer, call out "Forward, Miss Leonard! Ribbons!" and to see him walk away with assumed indifference while the customer made up her mind whether she should take one yard and a half or two yards of "our bébé satin" or "our rich lute," at one penny three farthings per yard. The final choice was the signal for Miss Leonard to rap on the counter and scream "Cash!" followed by the checking of the bill, the tying up of the parcel—"Will you take pins for the farthing, madam? Thank you!"—and the opening of the shop door for the customer's departure.

All the young ladies were thin and sallow, but not so thin and sallow as Mr. and Mrs. Pash and the baby. Rose would have left them within a week of her engagement if she had not been held by a feeling of pity. She hated the shop, the rubbish they sold, the attic she shared with the two other girls, the poor food; she hated it all, but the young couple had taken her into their confidence, told her their difficulties, and she stopped with them for several months.

Her next bid for a place in the labour market was in a paper-box factory, piece work, but so monotonous and poorly paid that she only stopped for three days. Then followed a period of answering all sorts of advertisements without success, for Rose cheerfully ignored the fact of her youth and inexperience, even to the point of applying, by correspondence, for the post of matron at a large orphan asylum for boys.

It was not stupidity on her part, but a restless

energy and impatience with her lot. The years passed so slowly! She was the type of girl who lived in the future, curious for knowledge of the mysteries of life, naturally courageous, instinctively pure in heart and mind, but reckless and passionate, moody and introspective.

Rose, by the time she was nineteen, had developed into a particularly quick and clever shorthand writer and typist, having borrowed money from Nannie Mordaunt to pay for lessons at a business college.

She became a typical business girl, not because she really cared for business, but because she saw that good salaries only go to the practical and efficient.

There never was a woman more essentially womanly, in all her good qualities and in all her faults, but Rose Leonard was just as essentially the product of the times: a little hard, more than a little materialistic, scorning sentimentality, generous in thought and word to other women, outwardly indifferent to the chance of marriage, inwardly as sensitive and quivering to the possibility of love as every other innocent girl of her age and temperament.

Mrs. Leonard was singularly ignorant of the character of her only daughter. They were excellent friends, with occasional and violent quarrels, but their serious talks were all on the subject of ways and means.

Singing and dancing pupils came to the first floor in Colet Street in very uncertain quantities, although Madame Leonard ("Madame" looked

more impressive than "Mrs." on her cards) undertook to train voices for grand opera, oratorio, or the musical comedy stage, and to teach any style of dancing, from classical Italian ballet to the latest coon step, from Spanish fandango to Irish jig.

Her principal patrons were ladies, who, like herself, were unable to obtain engagements themselves but wished their children to be trained for the stage. Madame Leonard's fees were most reasonable, but she had to struggle against formidable rivals in the various schools for stage dancing, to say nothing of more prosperous and successful private teachers.

On the day of Rose's adventure in Hyde Park she found her mother, lying on the sofa in Colet Street, in a particularly despondent mood.

"The two little Fuggles have left me, Rose!" said Madame Leonard, in a tone of despair. "Their papa refuses to pay for another quarter. He disapproves of the profession and wishes his daughters to learn something useful."

"Well, mother, the two little Fuggles would never have earned their bread at dancing," said Rose, consolingly. "I never saw such flat-footed, poker-backed children."

"What did it matter?" exclaimed her mother. "Mrs. Fuggle always paid on the tick."

"Yes, it's a great pity Mr. Fuggle has stopped it," said Rose, preparing herself a cup of tea.

"My elementary class is now reduced to one little girl!" continued Mrs. Leonard, with tears in her big, dark eyes.

Rose crossed the room and stooped down to kiss her.

"Never mind, mother dear!" she said. "You will get more. Does your tooth still ache? You look so worn out."

"It's all very well to talk!" said Mrs. Leonard, pushing away her daughter's hand, "but I see nothing ahead of me but starvation. I'm old—I'm ugly—I wish I was dead!"

"Oh, you're not old and ugly!" cried Rose, in a tone of distress.

"Yes, I am! Look at me!"

She suddenly sat up on the sofa and strained her untidy black hair back from her face with both hands. The sallow skin looked like a piece of old silk stretched over a skull, and the tendons of her long neck stood out like cords. Then she laughed, loudly and hysterically, showing her big teeth between the thin, colourless lips.

"My God! You see what poverty does for a woman!" she said. "I used to be happy and gay all day long. I used to look in the glass, like you're always doing, and think it would go on for ever."

"Oh, mother, you're talking wildly," protested Rose, who had not lost her childish dread of such outbursts.

"I only wanted a little happiness—a little pleasure—I only wanted to be like other women," Mrs. Leonard went on, rapidly, with all the bitter self-pity of the egoist. "I loved my husband, devotedly, distractedly, but we were so poor, so wretchedly poor! How he disappointed me! I

thought he was a rich man, but he dashed the cup of joy from my lips on the wedding day. He deceived me vilely, but I adored him."

"Oh, mother, don't be so theatrical!" exclaimed Rose, who had heard all this before and knew how untrue it was. "Father always did his best. You knew he was not a rich man. He never deceived you, and as for loving him so much——"

She checked herself with an effort, and sat down at the table to drink her tea.

"That's right—turn upon me! Insult me, you cruel, heartless girl! You serpent!" cried Mrs. Leonard.

Rose gave a contemptuous laugh. Her mother burst into tears, threw herself back on the sofa cushions and cried uncontrollably.

"Oh, mother, what's the matter with you? How weary I am of these miserable scenes. Oh, I'm so sick of it all!" cried Rose.

She pushed back her chair violently and began to walk up and down the room. Her long-suppressed boredom and loneliness found vent in a torrent of words. Mrs. Leonard retorted sharply. There was little affection on the girl's side, and no consideration on the mother's to curb their tongues.

The foolish bickering turned into an ugly quarrel. Both voices grew shrill and incoherent. As Mrs. Leonard grew hot, Rose paled. Home truths flashed from lip to lip, stinging, cruel, and remorseless.

Then, at the very height of the storm, there was a gentle, persistent tapping at the door. It had continued for several seconds before they heard it.

"What is it?" cried Rose, fiercely. "Who's there?"

"May I come in?" asked a soft voice.

Rose flung open the door.

Nannie Mordaunt was standing outside, in her little black coat and hat. She held in her hands a big bunch of flaming yellow chrysanthemums and glowing autumn leaves.

"These are for you and Mrs. Leonard," she said, blushing a little with shyness as she held out her gift.

Rose's face changed. She worshipped flowers.

"How beautiful! Boughs of gold! Look, mother!" she exclaimed, all her anger forgotten in a minute. "Come in, Nannie, come in and help me to put them in water."

As the pearl stringer crossed the threshold, apparently unconscious of the storm she had interrupted, the whole atmosphere seemed to change.

Shame and self-reproach swept over Rose. Mrs. Leonard looked at her daughter with a half-appealing, half-frightened smile. They forgave each other without a word. Rose opened the window and the fresh cool air of night soothed her quivering nerves. Mrs. Leonard gave a little sigh of content and closed her eyes.

Quietly, deft of hand and soft of tread, Nannie Mordaunt moved backwards and forwards, decking the room with her flowers.

CHAPTER V

ON the following day Rose Leonard, taking advantage of her mother's softened mood after the quarrel, went to make an appointment for her with Mr. Challis.

Mr. Challis was a dentist, but Mrs. Leonard insisted on calling him her medical man. It was so much more interesting to say he was treating her for neuralgia, headache, or facial rheumatism than decayed teeth.

Rose had known Mr. Challis nearly all her life. He had been a friend of her father, but was many years his junior. Rose had thought him a middle-aged man when she was a child, but as she grew older he seemed to grow younger, and at this period she rightly supposed him to be a man in the forties.

She often wondered whether he were a skilful dentist; indeed she had advised her mother to go elsewhere, his charges being so very low. She was too ignorant of dentists' fees to suspect that the little bills he sent to Mrs. Leonard would have astounded his richer patients. She thought he treated her mother and herself just like other people.

Walking through Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens on her way to Bayswater, where Mr.

Challis lived, Rose could not banish from her mind the little adventure of the previous day. Had she really followed an unknown man? What had he done, what had he said, to affect her so strangely? It was too absurd! It was incredible!

She recalled his erect, boyish figure, his fine voice, his thin, but full-lipped, bright-coloured face. She recalled the inviting smile, the beckoning hand, with which he had greeted her as he stood under the trees in the rain.

It was hard for Rose to confess herself a prude, but it was easier than believing that her unknown hero had offended her quick sense of right and wrong. That was a subtle point. Perhaps she had mistaken his expression. She began to blame herself. Of course he ought not to have smiled, but then—why had she looked at him at all? Was that a sufficient excuse for the smile? Another subtle point.

Perhaps the smile could be condoned, but the gesture was unforgiveable. Quite unforgiveable? Analysed, what was it? The right hand raised to the level of the shoulder, the palm turned towards the beconer's face, the first finger bent and moving backwards and forwards. That was all. Such a harmless gesture! By the time she reached Bayswater, Rose had forgiven him.

She stopped at a particularly neat house in a dull by-street. "Mr. Challis, Dental Surgeon," appeared on a brass plate on the front door, like the parent plate surrounded by little plates, inscribed: "Ring and Knock," "Visitors," "Servants," and "Surgery."

Rose rang and knocked, and was admitted by so youthful a parlour-maid that one might have mistaken her for a child if it had not been for her full-grown cap and apron. The pert self-possession of this small person was amazing to behold. She took Rose's umbrella out of her hand, banged it into the umbrella-stand, threw open a door, and said in one breath—"Yes-walk-in-please-what-name-take-a-seat-Mr.-Challis-will-be-disengaged d'reckly," before the visitor had had time to ask for him.

The waiting-room was furnished in the usual style of dentists' waiting-rooms, with dull furniture, illustrated papers, and a chilly little gas-fire in the grate, flanked by an unnecessary display of poker, shovel, tongs, and hearth-brush.

Rose sat down by the window, watching the small parlourmaid who had bounced out of the room, shutting the door behind her, arguing from the steps with a hawker of potted plants.

Mr. Challis entered the room, and was standing beside her before Rose heard him. His tread was soft in big, square-toed boots. He was a tall, somewhat heavily built man, fresh and healthy in colour if a little rubicund, with closely cut brown hair and beard. His eyes were small, but particularly bright and clear—merry, twinkling eyes, under straggling, thick eyebrows. His face was full and round in shape, but not too fat; his manner was a mixture of geniality and professional gravity.

He was so scrupulously neat and well-brushed, so spick and span from his dull, grey necktie to

his shiny, black boots, that his whole appearance gave an impression of conscious effort; one felt he was living up to his position as a professional man, not quite himself—a little old-fashioned, perhaps, in the conventionality of his views.

This thought passed through Rose's mind as they shook hands. Mr. Challis had big, powerful hands, but his shake was feeble and indefinite.

"What a long time since I saw you, Rose!" he exclaimed, the geniality getting the better of the professional gravity.

"Oh, I never have anything the matter with my teeth, Mr. Challis," she answered, showing a set that would have moved any dentist to admiration by their even whiteness, but to despair from a business point of view.

"I hoped you would accept my invitation to pay us a private visit now and then," he said.

"Of course—I'm afraid I had forgotten," said Rose, colouring a little at the confession; "I didn't know whether you really wanted me to come, Mr. Challis," she added hastily.

He did not give her the answer she expected. Any other man would have seized the opportunity to pay such a pretty girl an obvious compliment. The dentist pondered a minute.

"I don't know that I did want you particularly," he said seriously; "but I shouldn't have minded seeing you, all the same."

She was surprised and annoyed. It did not occur to her that "old Mr. Challis" might be teasing her.

"Then it was all for the best!" she said. "I

didn't want to come, and you didn't want to see me."

"Then!" said Mr. Challis, with emphasis.

"Then——?" she repeated the word questioningly.

He waved her to a seat, a little too much as if it were the fatal chair in the surgery, and sat down himself, facing her.

"My mother was unwell all the summer," he explained. "One of my aunts and a couple of cousins were stopping with us, and our domestic arrangements were decidedly uncomfortable. I wished you to visit us at a more auspicious time. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said, more than a little surprised at his unusually grave manner.

He always chose and pronounced his words carefully, as if he had not quite forgotten a time when possibly the construction of a sentence gave him trouble, and the aspirate lurked, like a hidden enemy, ready to trip him up.

"These little troubles are of the past," continued Mr. Challis. "My mother is herself again, and my relatives have returned to Tunbridge Wells—may they long live there!"

Rose laughed.

"I mean Tunbridge Wells is a delightful spot, and exactly suited to my poor aunt's complaint, Bayswater was not," said Mr. Challis, with those twinkling eyes of his discreetly half-closed.

"As for our domestic upheaval," he went on, after a moment's pause, "we ought to be thankful to have got rid of Elizabeth at any cost. My

professional work had a morbid attraction for poor Elizabeth. Whenever I opened the surgery door quickly I found he. on her knees listening at the keyhole. It was slightly annoying. In Olive we have a treasure."

"Who is Olive?" asked Rose, who had never found Mr. Challis so communicative before.

"The girl who let you in. Her name is Olive Hooper, pronounced in her own set Olly 'ooper. I hope she will stop with us. Her father is an old acquaintance of mine, a plumber by trade."

"Do you let him plumb for you?" asked Rose. Mr. Challis shook his head.

"Well, no! I did employ Mr. Hooper last winter. It was only a busted jint—I quote his own words—but it was too much for him, and all he succeeded in doing was to flood the basement. I had better have done it myself."

Rose laughed again.

"You're too good-natured," she said. "Last time I came to see you there was an awfully stupid man painting the back of the house, don't you remember? We watched him out of the surgery window, and I don't think he had handled a brush in his life. You'd taken his word, without any references, that he was an experienced house-painter. Do you always take people on their own valuation, Mr. Challis?"

Instead of answering her question he asked another.

"Do you think I am quite a fool, Rose?"

"Oh, no!"

"A bit of a fool?"

"No!"

"Your second 'no' lacked the decision of the first, my dear."

He suddenly laid one of his big hands on her shoulder.

"I've got a sneaking fondness for rogues and vagabonds like that house-painter," he said, in a low voice, almost timidly. "But I never confess it, Rose. My family is so respectable and proper. I'm so respectable and proper myself. Obligated to be. Hush! Don't you betray me. Do you know what I'd really like to be?"

"No!" said Rose for the third time.

"A travelling tinker!" he whispered.

"Why?" asked the girl.

She could not understand him in the least. He had never talked to her like this before.

"I'd like to sit at the edge of the road, mending kettles," he went on; "that's my secret ambition. Nobody knows it. I don't like town life, or stuffy houses, or black clothes—don't I look like a mute?—but the long, winding lanes, little dells, and sleepy woods—ah! Mrs. Carter! How do you do? And how is the poor mouth?"

He broke off in the middle of his sentence, as the door was thrown open by Olly 'ooper, to greet the patient who entered. Then he turned to Rose again with his usual manner.

"Now, Miss Leonard, will you step into the surgery and I'll look at my engagement book to make an appointment for mama. Pray be seated, Mrs. Carter. I'll only detain you a few minutes. Severe toothache all night? Dear me! We must

see what can be done. This way, Miss Leonard—allow me!"

He ushered Rose into the surgery—"ushered" is a word that conveys an idea of the pomposity of Mr. Challis as he did so—and closed the door behind them.

"Are you going to tell Mrs. Carter about tinkering kettles?" asked Rose, quietly, as he sat down at his neat writing-desk to make a note in his neat engagement book.

"Flattering herself?" repeated Mr. Challis, with a smile; "we don't tinker kettles in a dental surgery, my dear young lady."

Rose gave a little shudder as she glanced from the big, padded chair to the drilling machine beside it. What a gloomy place! The waiting-room, where they could hear Mrs. Carter groaning, was cheerful in comparison. Then she looked at the big cabinet of instruments, with its half-open drawers; at the window, overlooking a strip of well-kept garden; at the two oil paintings, the only pictures on the walls, of Mr. Challis's father and mother, shiny, staring, grotesque; at the mantel-piece—there her eyes stopped.

An expression of surprise and uncertainty came into her face. She crossed the room hastily to look at a photograph in an oxidised silver frame. It was the photograph of a young man. She instantly recognised the wave of fair hair, the full lips, the open shirt collar and big, loose tie, for even these peculiarities were characteristic of her Hyde Park orator.

"Now, let me see, shall we say to-morrow after-

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noon at four o'clock for mama's appointment?" said the dentist, turning round in his chair.

"Yes. Mr. Challis! Who is this?" asked Rose, curiously.

He put on his gold-rimmed eye-glasses.

"The elderly lady?"—there were two photographs on the mantelpiece. "She is my aunt Sophia, not the aunt at Tunbridge Wells——"

"No! Who is the man?" interrupted Rose.

Mr. Challis rose and stood behind her, looking at the photograph over her shoulder.

"Oh, that young fellow is a grandson of my dear old governor, the man to whom I was apprenticed as a lad. His name is Milrake—Eugene Milrake. I think he is going to work with me, when he can make up his mind to begin."

"Work with you?" repeated Rose, in a tone of slight contempt. "Do you mean he wants to be a dentist?"

The idea of such a thing gave her a little shock. She thought of his success with the crowd in Hyde Park, the charm of his appearance and voice, and then she thought of the dull, disagreeable work of a dentist. It was admirably suited to a man like Mr. Challis. Eugene Milrake was quite another matter. Already his name sounded familiar to her ready ears.

"I don't think Eugene wants to be a dentist," said her companion, slowly. "But he has to earn his living, and I didn't know of anything else to suggest. I wonder what would really suit him?"

He looked thoughtfully and affectionately at the

photograph, speaking more to himself than to the girl.

"He might be an orator," hinted Rose, innocently.

"To be sure, or a genius!" said Mr. Challis.

"Now you're laughing at me," she cried.

"One is as likely as the other," he answered.

"Eugene is no more of an orator than I am."

"If you had heard——" she began, and stopped abruptly, having almost betrayed the Hyde Park incident.

"I have heard him hold forth many times, for he never does anything else," said Mr. Challis; adding quickly, "but he's a good lad, a very good lad. Now, shall we say to-morrow afternoon for mama, Rose?"

Rose turned her eyes reluctantly from the photograph.

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Challis. Goodbye!"

She put out her hand for his feeble shake, but he surprised her by a grip that was firm and lingering.

"When am I going to see you again?" he asked.

"Don't ignore us so unkindly in the future, my dear. My mother will be happy to offer you a cup of tea any afternoon at half-past four."

"I don't leave the office till five o'clock. I'm a working girl, you know, Mr. Challis."

"Then give us the pleasure of your company in the evening," he said, with old-fashioned courtesy.

"We dine at half-past seven. I prefer a midday dinner myself, but I can't spare the time."

"I'll be very pleased to come," said Rose, and

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she added, as carelessly as she could, "Perhaps you'll introduce me to the orator on the mantel-piece?"

"Eugene? To be sure! Certainly. I'll tell him to stop after his work."

They went out of the surgery into the hall. Mr. Challis paused a minute with his hand on the door, smiling at her rather ruefully.

"I'm afraid mama is a little—trying when she has toothache, eh? You look worn and troubled, my dear."

The kindness of his expression and voice moved her to confidence.

"I find life very hard and very dull, Mr. Challis. It isn't mother's fault. I'm used to her."

"Very hard and very dull?" He repeated the words softly to himself.

"Please don't think I'm grumbling," she added. "My lot is no worse than that of hundreds of other girls who live as I do."

"You don't take any interest in your office work?" he asked.

"Good heavens, no! What do I care about bills, and invoices, and estimates and all the rest of it? I hate our firm and all its works. Good-bye once more."

He watched her down the steps, waving his big hand and smiling blandly as she turned her head to nod.

Then he went back to the surgery and stood idly for several minutes, undisturbed by Mrs. Carter's distant groans, looking out of the window at his trim little garden. For once the dahlias and

geraniums failed to interest him. Whatever were his secret thoughts they wholly changed the expression of his face, making it look young, intent, unspeakably kind and sensitive.

The most keen observer would hardly have known him for the man who, every day and all day, sympathised with his patients in so professional, impersonal, pompous a manner.

CHAPTER VI

WITH her black bag in one hand, and a big umbrella held over her head in the other, Nannie Mordaunt made her way from Colet Street to Mayfair.

Mayfair was the last neighbourhood in London where one would have expected the pearl stringer to have friends, and had he seen her pick out one of the biggest houses in Temple Place, coolly ring the bell and gain instant admittance, her descent to the lower regions of the mansion would have instantly occurred to his mind.

Nannie, however, was taken up, not down, the wide staircase. She still gripped the family umbrella and black hand-bag. The whole figure of the girl was out of keeping with her surroundings, although she had on her new winter coat and hat and a new pair of brown, shiny kid gloves.

Her little feet tapped smartly on the polished stairs, as she followed a footman to the third floor. She hardly gave a glance at the white panelled walls, but stared longingly at great bowls of hyacinths and tulips in the glimpses she caught of rooms on the way. The house was familiar to her. She paid it a visit every six months or so to restring Lady Rostron's pearls.

Several of Nannie's patrons refused to trust their pearls out of their own houses, and employed her through their jewellers' recommendation.

On reaching the third floor the footman handed her over, like a little prisoner, to a lady's maid, of whom Nannie would have been frightened if she had not felt so utterly insignificant and crushed out of existence.

The maid took her into a small room, half boudoir, half dressing-room, that always made her think of a jewel casket of pale jade she had seen at South Kensington Museum, with its green walls; a jewel casket filled with dainty toys and perfumed with attar of roses.

Nannie Mordaunt removed her hat and jacket and took her silk, fine wire for a needle, and little pair of sharp scissors out of the hand-bag. Then the maid unlocked a jewel box and drew a string of pearls into the light.

Nannie held them between her two hands, admiringly, before she began to work.

Orients, well matched, of exquisite shape and colour, they hung together, pearl kissing pearl, like a hundred dewdrops on the petals of a white rose, like jewels shaken from the rainbow, like tiny bubbles floating in the summer air, like tears that tremble as they fall.

Snip-snap-snip-snap went the sharp little scissors, cutting the first knot between the lustrous beads and the diamond clasp. She rarely handled a more beautiful necklace.

As she threaded her fairy needle, Lady Rostron hurried into the room.

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Lady Rostron was generally in a hurry. She was an absent-minded, vague, pretty woman of five-and-thirty, kind and sweet to everybody, but never quite in touch with the stern realities of life, for her world was peopled with admirers and lovers—a devoted husband, fond children, perfectly trained servants, grateful pensioners, affectionate friends, humble flatterers—and she did not believe that there were any evils that a sweet smile and a full purse could not assuage.

She often said that Charity was her only hobby, and devoutly thanked Heaven for our present social state, for if there were not the poor and wretched to be fed and patronised, if we all had equal opportunities for happiness and there were no slums, or sweated women, or starved children, what would become of the luxury of giving?

"Good morning, Miss Harris! How do you do?" was her greeting to Nannie—she always forgot names—as she shook hands quite affectionately with the pearl stringer. Lady Rostron's hands were taper-fingered and very soft.

"I'm afraid my pearls badly need attending to," she went on, stooping over Nannie as she worked. "I've been wearing them continually for the last few months. One never wearies of pearls. All other jewels are so garish. How I envy you, Miss Harris! Yours is such beautiful work. Isn't it beautiful, Court?"

"Yes, m'lady," said the maid.

"I should never get tired of threading pearls. I should never want to leave off. Would you, Court?"

"No, m'lady," said the maid.

Nannie Mordaunt thought of her quiet aunt, who had been stringing pearls for thirty years, and wondered whether she would endorse the sentiment.

Lady Rostron sat down by the table, her pale-blue eyes following every bead from the old silk to the new with that quiet, peculiar joy in possession that pearls arouse in the richest women, greater than gold or every other jewel that gold can buy.

"I want you to look at some old seed pearl ornaments, Miss Harris, my brother-in-law has given to me," said the lady, after a pause. "They are rather badly broken, but very quaint. Perhaps those clever fingers of yours will be able to do something with them. Mr. Rostron bought them at a little shop in Camden Town. Oh! This may be Mr. Rostron. He'll be able to tell you all about it."

As she spoke there was a tap at the door, and a man entered the room at her quick summons. The maid went out. Lady Rostron leaned back in her chair with an extended hand.

"Oh, Hal dear, I've just been telling Miss Harris, who is re-stringing my pearls, about those beautiful old ornaments you picked up last Monday in Camden Town."

"On Saturday at Clerkenwell," corrected the newcomer.

"I'm sure she'll be able to mend them. Don't you think so, Miss Harris? They're the dearest, most dainty, old-fashioned little bits! Hal dear, give me that yellow box on the writing-table. No, not the yellow box, that's where I keep the boys'

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letters all by themselves—the red box, Hal, on the opposite side. Thanks, dear!”

Nannie Mordaunt, intent on her work, had hardly noticed Lady Rostron's brother-in-law, and, after one glance, his indifference had equalled her own.

He was accustomed to the passing of his sister-in-law's satellites, maids, manicurists, hair specialists, milliners, and regarded them all with amused, but incurious, eyes.

He leaned on the back of Lady Rostron's chair as she opened the red box. He liked to see her handling her jewels. She was like a pretty child playing with coloured beads. It was only when she talked to him seriously about politics or philanthropy that he was really bored.

The old pearl ornaments consisted of a long neck chain, torn and worn, earrings, and a couple of butterfly brooches. Nannie put down her tweezers and arranged them in a row.

“These can be easily mended, madam,” she said, “although they are badly broken.”

“I am so glad!” exclaimed Lady Rostron. “Will you do it now?”

“I'm afraid I must take them home, madam. It will be rather a long job. You see the mother-o'-pearl frames are broken.”

She laid one of the butterfly brooches in the palm of her hand, examining it closely.

Henry Rostron looked with interest, for the first time, at the pearl stringer, from her thin, deft fingers to the tight coil of her pale hair.

“Could you make a brooch like that?” he asked.

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She lifted her head and answered in a soft, meek voice.

"Oh, yes, sir."

"The whole thing?" He asked another question.

"We don't make the mother-o'-pearl frames, sir, but when they are cut and drilled we sew on the seed pearls. This is a very old-fashioned design, sewn with horse-hair."

Nannie stopped, suddenly conscious of the sound of her own voice.

"How old is it, do you think?" he asked.

"I shouldn't be surprised if it was a hundred years old, sir."

"How long would it take you to make a similar butterfly?"

She measured the brooch thoughtfully.

"It's two inches across the wings—about four or five days, sir."

"Extraordinary!" exclaimed Lady Rostron, who would have expressed the same admiration if she had said four hours or four months.

"Do you drill pearls at your—house?" said Henry Rostron, hesitating between "office" and "shop."

"No, sir. It's a very risky business, is drilling pearl."

"Why?" asked Lady Rostron.

"It's got to be done so very true, madam," answered Nannie. "You could spoil a pearl worth hundreds of pounds as easy——! My aunt used to drill them herself years ago. It was a lovely thing to see her do it, but her sight isn't as good as it was,

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"so we've given it up. I couldn't manage the drilling machine."

"Why not?" it was Henry Rostron who asked the question this time.

"Oh, I wouldn't dare, sir!"

Her shocked voice made him laugh, but it was a very soft, indulgent laugh. Nannie thought she had never seen such a kind, good-tempered gentleman. His face was wrinkled and puckered into a network of lines, tanned and drawn by long exposure to Eastern skies. The dark skin made his eyes look grey and pale; his other features were big, but finely modelled; his expression was somewhat sad and weary in repose, but keen and alert when he talked or smiled.

It was not in Nannie's power to study or attempt analysis of character, but Henry Rostron appealed to her gentle nature from that first hour of their meeting. She had a strange feeling of having seen him before; as strange a certainty that she would see him again.

"How lovely! How perfectly lovely!" exclaimed Lady Rostron, when Nannie held up her newly strung necklace of a hundred pearls.

Nannie looked at it too with silent admiration. Henry glanced from one woman to the other.

"The structure of a pearl," he said, quietly, "consists of concentric shells and resembles that of an onion."

"Hal, you're abominable!" interrupted his sister-in-law, fastening the diamond clasp round her neck.

"The pearl," he went on, in the same voice, "is

but a distemper in the creature that produces it."

"Then I wish that all the shell-fish in the world would suffer from the same distemper as the pearl oysters!" said Lady Rostron.

"The finest pearl I ever saw belonged to a diamond merchant in Hatton Gardens," Rostron continued. "He was an old German Jew, steeped in money, but I've never forgotten the seraphic expression of his face as he rolled this perfect pearl in the hollow of his brown old palm."

"I expect Miss Thompson has handled some of the most lovely pearls in London," said Lady Rostron, giving Nannie yet another name.

"We don't often get anything finer than your necklace, madam," said Nannie, who was packing her hand-bag.

"Oh, it's sweet of you to say that!" exclaimed the lady, as if it were a personal compliment. "Now, you'll mend the old pearl ornaments, won't you, Miss Thompson? They're the kind of things one could wear at my 'Sober Afternoons,' aren't they, Hal?" she added, turning to her brother-in-law.

"What on earth are your 'Sober Afternoons,' Shelagh?" he asked.

"In connection with St. Barnabas, in Walworth. No! It isn't St. Barnabas. I can't recollect the name of the church, but we try to get hold of the wives of drunkards, you know."

"Ah! Isn't the name 'Sober Afternoons' a little too gloomy?" said Rostron. "I should have

thought 'Jolly Evenings' or 'Melancholy Morns' would be more suitable."

"Of course we use the word 'sober' in a wide sense," said Lady Rostron.

"Perhaps that's as well," observed her brother-in-law.

"We mean temperate, quiet, thoughtful—just the emotions to suggest a simple gown with old-fashioned pearl ornaments," she went on.

"Do the drunkards' wives turn up in simple gowns with old-fashioned pearl ornaments?" asked Henry Rostron.

"Oh, no, poor dears!" exclaimed his sister-in-law, with genuine distress. "It would break your heart to talk to them, Hal! Sometimes I really wonder whether we are doing our best for the poor, but I suppose we are—of course we are! If only we could induce them to be more thrifty and temperate and self-respecting! I'm sure I try, in my own way, to set a good example."

"In thriftiness and simplicity? I'm sure you do, my dear Shelagh," said Henry Rostron, with a glance round the jewel-box of a room.

"Well, it's all comparative, Hal," said Lady Rostron, plaintively.

Meanwhile the pearl stringer had finished packing the hand-bag, put on her hat and coat, and was patiently waiting to be dismissed.

"Good-bye, Miss Harris!" said Lady Rostron, again shaking hands. "You'll send back the seed pearls as soon as you can, won't you? I am sure you will make them look perfectly beautiful. You're so clever! Good-bye!"

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Nannie was too shy and embarrassed by her patron's effusion to answer very clearly. She murmured her thanks and made an awkward bow to Henry Rostron as he opened the door.

"Poor child!" he said, closing it behind her. "She has a very good, likeable face, and I don't think I've ever seen prettier hands. She was born for her work."

"Yes, she's a very dear girl," said Lady Rostron, vaguely, sitting down at her writing-table and instantly beginning to write. She wrote, as she talked, without troubling to think of what she meant to say.

Henry Rostron took the hint, but he stopped at the door for a minute to ask a question.

"Is your little pearl stringer's name Harris or Thompson, Shelagh? Forgive me for interrupting you, but you called her both, indiscriminately."

"Did I? How stupid! Those sort of people like one to remember their names. I make a point of doing it. Harris—Thompson—no! I think it's Burrows. Wait a minute, Hal dear. I'll look at Fleming's letter. He's the jeweller who sends her. It's no trouble—there, you can see for yourself."

She tossed her brother-in-law the jeweller's letter and scratched away at her notes.

"How absurd of me to call that poor girl Harris or Thompson!" she continued, looking over her shoulder after a pause. "Am I right this time? Fleming says it's Burrows, doesn't he?"

"Well, Shelagh dear," answered her brother-in-law, affectionately, "the jeweller's name appears

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to be Desmond, not Fleming, and the pearl stringer's name is Mordaunt; but otherwise you're right—you're perfectly right."

He had made a mental note of the girl's name and address, and restored the letter to his sister-in-law's desk.

CHAPTER VII

"**N**OW, show me how you do your work."

"It is so simple, sir."

"But I couldn't do it."

"You're a gentleman. It wouldn't be suitable."

"You are right. A man's fingers are much too clumsy."

"Not yours, if you chose to try, sir."

Henry Rostron laid his long, yellow-skinned hands on the table, spreading the fingers wide. Nannie looked at them critically.

"They are hands which have done their share of hard work in the world, but they would be useless in stringing pearls," he said. "Now, show me how you begin."

"First of all I cut my strands of silk," said Nannie, obediently, "then I pin one end on the table—so—then I thread my needle——"

"Wait a bit! Where do you buy such peculiar needles?"

"I don't buy them, sir. I just double a piece of thin wire and twist it together, leaving an eye—so; you couldn't buy a needle fine enough for seed pearls."

"I understand," said Rostron, gravely. "Go on!"

"Well, you see I've threaded my needle," continued Nannie, with equal gravity, "now I take this tiny spring to keep the ring of the snap firm. There you are! Now I make a knot before the first pearl is passed from the old silk to the new. That's the one difficult thing to make—the knot. It's the secret of pearl stringing. It took me over a year to learn how to make a knot like that."

"Do you always make a knot between the beads?"

"Oh, no! It's just as the ladies wish. Of course it strengthens the silk to knot it, but the pearls look prettier touching one another. Don't you think so, Mr. Rostron?"

"Yes—I really haven't thought about it—yes, I think they do. Are there many pearl stringers in London, Nannie?"

"Oh, no. It isn't a trade people know about. My grandmother worked in this shop, and the lady who taught her was taught by *her* mother, then my grandmother taught my aunt, and my aunt taught me."

She laughed at her sentence, colouring a little. Nannie's blushes were always faint and fleeting. Her pale face was never, even for a moment, vivid.

"The skill in the knot will become hereditary," said Rostron.

"No, sir, we've all got to learn it for ourselves," said Nannie, simply.

It was the third or fourth time Henry Rostron had sat beside her as she worked. He could not have explained the attraction that the small shop

In Colet Street had had for him from the day of his first visit.

Let the obvious reason be put aside at once and for ever. He was not in love with the pearl stringer. He was a man of far too honest a nature—of too wide and varied experience of life—to be moved to any feeling but kind affection for a girl so ignorant of the possible dangers of such a friendship. She charmed him, it is true, but it was a subtle, slight charm, no stronger than a strand of the silk that slipped through her pearls.

Much as he knew of women, Henry Rostron had never met a girl who impressed him as being at once so practical and so simple, so transparent and so reticent. She was willing enough to talk of her family, especially of her brother Perth, and of her dear friend, Rose Leonard, but she had nothing to say about herself. He was trying to approach the shy, sensitive being through her work.

"I have lived the best years of my life in the land of pearls, Nannie," he said. "I was born in India, and I've been in the Indian Civil Service for sixteen years."

"Oh! Are you a pearl-fisher?" asked the girl, innocently.

He laughed.

"No, I was in the Forestry Department. There were no pearls to be seen in my part of the country, except in the ornaments of my Indian friends. Pearls have been associated with India, you know, from time immemorial. They say that the Sun God, Mithra, wore earrings of pearl, and

there is a legend that Vishnu gave them to his daughter, Pandara, as a wedding gift."

"Then there may have been pearl stringers in the old, old days!" exclaimed Nannie.

"Of course there were," said Rostron, smiling. "I think there have been pearl stringers since—well, the creation of the original oyster."

"Oh, Mr. Rostron!" cried Nannie. "Did the ladies wear necklaces in those days?"

"What do you think yourself, Nannie?"

She pondered a minute.

"There were not any ladies at all when the animals and fishes were created, were there, Mr. Rostron?"

"Eve appeared upon the scene very soon after, you know."

"That's true," said Nannie; "but do you believe that she wore pearls? It doesn't say so, does it?"

"You're too literal for me, Nannie."

The faint flush of colour that he liked to see came again into her face.

"I don't mean to be impertinent, sir, by contradicting what you say——"

"My dear child!" he interrupted, "you could no more be impertinent than I could suspect you of it. Besides, you didn't contradict me. You corrected me in a Biblical error."

She looked distressed, and his tone altered.

"What a sensitive girl it is! How do you manage to get along in this hard old world, Miss Mordaunt, if you take every light word to heart? You ought to live in a mother-o'-pearl shell!"

She carefully tied the last knot before replying,

then she clipped the silk with her sharp scissors, laid down the necklace, and looked at him thoughtfully.

"You have been so kind to me since we met, Mr. Rostron," she began, slowly. "You have given me such beautiful presents——"

"Nonsense! A pot of hyacinths and half a dozen tulips!" he put in.

"You have told me such interesting things," she went on, "and I can't help being afraid of offending you. You might go away and never come back. I know how touchy ladies are, and perhaps gentlemen are the same."

"Now, do I look touchy? Have I given you the impression of being a fiery-tempered, ill-conditioned brute who mustn't be contradicted or thwarted in any way?" asked Rostron.

"No! No! I didn't mean to imply that!" said Nannie.

He put out his hand and laid it over hers, and, at his touch, Nannie trembled from head to foot. She was amazed at herself, and he was wholly unconscious of the sudden tumult in her heart.

"Don't vex your little mind with doubts of your friends," he said. "If they are going to be offended for nothing and are in the habit of walking off when you contradict them—let 'em walk! As far as I'm concerned, you won't get rid of me so easily. I'm lazy. I've got into the habit of coming here and I don't mean to get out of it."

He pressed her hands with his long, thin fingers and let her go. She smiled at the idea of his laziness. If ever there was a man whose whole

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personality denied the words, it was Henry Rostron. His face, his figure, his step, his gestures, were all expressive of disciplined energy and the driving qualities of hard work and mental concentration.

"Then I may talk to you just as I please and you won't be offended?" said Nannie, with a foolish, vain desire to prolong the mood of the flying moments.

"Of course you may! I want to know some of the ideas born of your long, silent hours at work," he answered; "you asked me just now if I were a pearl-fisher, Nannie. Well, I am, but the pearls I seek are not like yours; they are called thoughts, and my difficulties are even greater than those encountered in the ancient fisheries of Ceylon."

"Where do you find your best specimens?" asked Nannie.

"Generally in the oldest shells."

She looked puzzled.

"Shells made of parchment, Nannie," he explained, with his whimsical smile. "Sometimes there is only one pearl lost in a hundred pages, sometimes there is a long string of them; but if they are very well matched we call them a poem, instead of a string—it's a prettier word. Sometimes one hunts through a whole bushel of shells without any result, or, at the best, there are only little, ill-begotten, stolen things, like the pearls stimulated to artificial growth in China."

"Do you never find any good specimens at all in up-to-date shells?" asked Nannie, thinking of her own little library of cheap editions of modern books.

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"Yes, indeed. There's as good shellfish in the sea, you know, as ever came out of it, and as good pearls in the shellfish."

"Doesn't a great deal depend on the fisherman?" said Nannie.

"True. A poor fisherman will miss the rosy pearls."

"But the most valuable specimens are perfectly round, with clear, white 'skin,'" said Nannie, becoming literal again. "Then comes the *bouton*, or button shape, and then the drop, or pear."

"True again," agreed her companion. "But I'm an eccentric fisherman; I admire the rare and strangely coloured."

"Are you still talking about thoughts or real pearls?" she asked.

"Both. I want you to show me both."

"My thoughts! Oh, they're not worth discovering."

"Little seed pearls of thoughts? Perhaps my wit is not a fine enough needle to pick them up."

He rose from his chair and stretched his arms over his head, looking very long and lank in the dimming light of the small room.

"I'm tired. Lady Rostron gave a dance last night, and I didn't get to bed till the small hours were getting big."

"Are you fond of dancing?" asked Nannie.

"Hate it! I always want to hide my grey hairs on such occasions, but my sister-in-law insists on my presence. Can you dance, Nannie?"

"No, sir; I've never tried. The lady in our

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first floor, the mother of my young lady friend I told you about, gives dancing lessons."

"Let her teach you."

"What's the good? It wouldn't be any help in my business, would it?"

"Do you never think of anything but your business, Nannie?"

The dreamy expression that Rose Leonard often surprised in the pearl-stringer's eyes came into them now. She did not turn her face up to the strip of sky over the roofs, as Rose had always seen her do, but looked appealingly at Henry Rostron. She felt that he would understand her.

"I think of so many things," she said, in a voice that was almost troubled in its intensity; "but they are all shadowy and dim. Sometimes, when I'm sitting here alone, the room seems to be filled with crowds of people. They are all the people I've read and heard about, and they stand round me, smiling and nodding their heads. It used to be just the same when I was a child. I've seen the fairies flying over the roofs. For years the chimney-pots were hidden by the blossoms and leaves of Jack's magic beanstalk, and the giants used to walk over the houses as if they were little hillocks. Do you think I'm very stupid, Mr. Rostron?"

"No, Nannie; no."

"It's even nicer to hear things than to see them," she went on, leaning her cheek on her hand and still looking up into his face. "I often listen to the rumbling in the street till it turns into the

sound of a tournament. I love tournaments. I never thought of that till Rose Leonard gave me Scott's book called 'Ivanhoe.' Oh, Mr. Rostron, have you read it?"

"Years ago—yea."

"Isn't it a lovely tale? Don't you wish Wilfrid had married Rebecca? But I like Robin Hood the best of all. D'you know what I'd do if I was rich?"

"What would you do?"

"I'd go and live in Sherwood Forest—no! I'd go to the Holy Land. Have you read 'The Talisman'?' That's another of Scott's novels."

"I think I have read them all. My favourite is 'Old Mortality,'" said her companion.

She looked a little disappointed.

"Is it? I haven't read that one. I'll ask for it at the public library. Rose Leonard says that 'Kenilworth' is the best."

"When do you have time to read?" he asked.

"Oh, in the evenings, and on Sunday. I'm a very slow reader, but I never forget. My mother is different. She gets through a book so quick. She don't care for the books I do; she says they're dry. Now, my aunt is fond of old-fashioned poetry, especially Eliza Cook. Have you read her works?"

"Well, I'm afraid I haven't been slap-bang through her lately," confessed Henry Rostron.

"Mr. Wegg said that to Mr. Boffin, didn't he?" asked Nannie. "I've read most of Charles Dickens's novels, and several of Thackeray's, but I don't like him nearly so much; do you?"

"Yes; just as much. There's not an ounce of difference between my love for them both."

"Then you know most of the characters in their books? Hundreds, aren't there? No wonder this room seems crowded when I fancy I see them all!"

"They must climb on one another's shoulders, Nannie. They couldn't get in at the door," he said, smiling.

"Oh, but the room gets wide," she answered, spreading out her arms. "Sometimes it changes into a marble hall, with high pillars and great glass windows, like South Kensington Museum. It's grand, Mr. Rostron. Nobody sees it but me, you know; and I never tell."

"You are telling me."

"Oh—you!"

She stopped abruptly, suddenly remembering that he was a stranger. It had been so easy to talk to him, but at his words her natural shyness and diffidence came rushing back. She would say no more.

"Good-bye, Nannie!" said Henry Rostron. "When I come to see you next time, I'll bring four old friends of mine who will be able to tell you all sorts of exciting tales."

"Oh, please! I shan't know what to say to them," she exclaimed, in an alarmed voice.

"They'll do all the talking. You will only have to listen. Their names are Aramis, Porthos, Athos, and D'Artagnan. You'll fall in love with D'Artagnan. I warn you!"

She looked so frightened that he burst out laughing.

"You poor little girl ! I'm only talking about a book."

"Oh, Mr. Rostron, you gave me quite a turn !"

She went to the shop door to see him off. The little back room, when she returned to it, seemed unusually dull and dreary, but Nannie Mordaunt was not the girl to brood.

She lighted the gas and went on with her work.

CHAPTER VIII

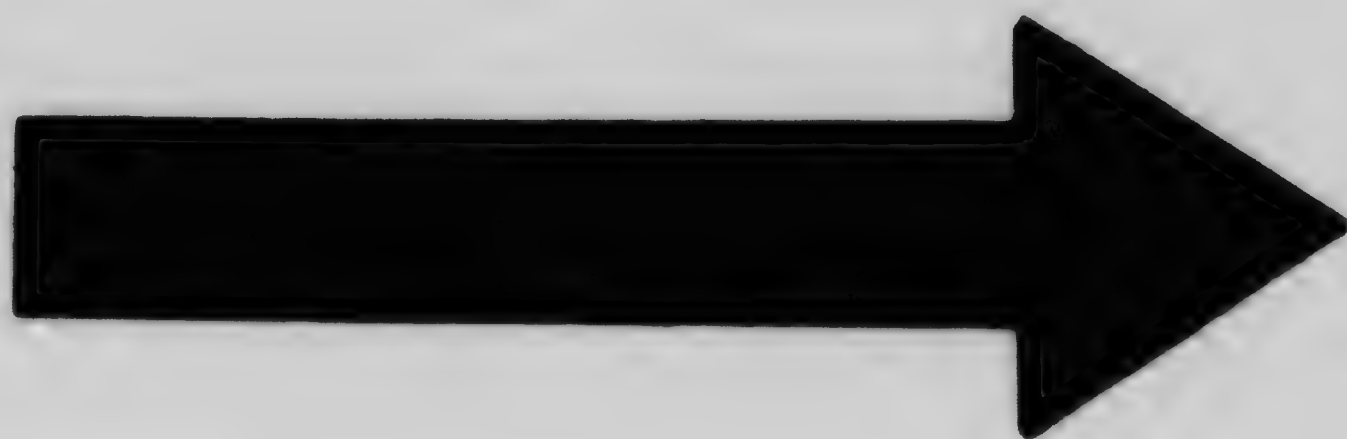
THERE are periods of life that seem to pass not only quicker than all other times, but are fraught with such subtle emotion and strange possibilities of joy that they shine like vivid colours, ever afterwards, in the mists of memory.

Time and experience mellow the bright tints; they lose their fatal brilliance, but they are never forgotten. There are days in youth when no jarring note can spoil the music of the ringing hours, and when the eyes see all things in the colour of a Summer rose.

Such days were discovered by Rose Leonard when first she met Eugene Milrake.

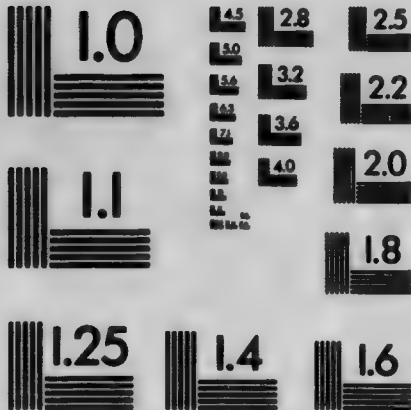
Only a girl of her passionate, but undeveloped, nature could have been moved to such blind infatuation. He did not make her happy. He excited and dazzled her. She lost all sense of proportion. He filled the world. He personified all wisdom, all enthusiasm, all knowledge.

His poor tirades sounded, in her ears, like noble eloquence; she read unsuspected meanings into his idle talk; his humour, far to seek at the best of times, became wit; she mistook his ignorance for boyish simplicity, and his inordinate conceit for supreme self-confidence.



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Eugene Milrake was three-and-twenty, but he looked younger with his waves of light hair, his blue eyes, a trifle too close together, and his agile figure. Emotional and high-spirited, apparently indifferent to the coarser temptations of life, he was a man of few definite vices, but of dangerous weakness and lack of self-control.

Always ingratiating and affectionate, there were few people who could resist the appeal of his frank, apparently open disposition.

Rose Leonard had forgotten the incident in Hyde Park, for she soon learned, from his own lips, that Eugene was the last man in the world to offend a girl, consciously or unconsciously.

He professed an absolute ignorance of woman and all her ways.

Mr. Challis always invited Rose very kindly to the house in Bayswater, and his mother treated her with somewhat chilly cordiality.

Mrs. Challis was a little, elderly lady, who is best described by that expressive, but obsolete, word, genteel. She never mentioned the poverty of her own youth, or the struggles of her only son. Her favourite topics of conversation were the frivolities of the upper, and the wickedness of the lower, classes. Her chief occupation was making woolwork.

Rose Leonard was always amused by the drawing-room at the dentist's house. It was a veritable temple of woolwork. She could not tell whether Mr. Challis shared his mother's tastes. The upholstered furniture, mercifully hidden from view on ordinary occasions by cretonne covers, was all

aglow with elaborate woolwork, the favourite design being a bouquet of roses, lilies, and variegated foliage, on a purple ground.

Mrs. Challis had spent years over the work. She was fond of vivid colours, and, if she had had her way, her son would have appeared in knitted red waistcoats with yellow stripes, but fortunately his conventional ideas about the appearance of a professional man saved him. It was only when they were alone that he put on the gay waistcoats and glaring slippers of the old lady's manufacture.

Little of Rose's time was spent in the woolwork drawing-room. She usually made her way to the little outhouse at the end of the garden.

Often and often, in the quiet years that followed, Rose would recall those vital days, wondering at herself.

She could feel again the fresh, soft wind of Spring in the carefully tended little garden, with its clumps of orderly primroses—garden primroses, not a hint of the sweet disorder of the woods about them—and the first green spears of lilies-of-the-valley driving through the brown earth.

Her heart would beat more quickly as she neared the closed door of the outhouse, its entrance shadowed by a big lilac bush. She would pause for a minute before tapping, to enjoy the thrilling thought that Eugene was so near, but still unconscious of her approach.

Then he would throw open the door, and the well-remembered sensation of mingled delight and fear would sweep over her.

What did they say to each other in those foolish,

passionate, thoughtless days? Definite words were forgotten in the passing of the quiet years, but not the grip of his hands, his swift closing of the door behind them, the sense of welcome bondage in his close embrace.

The workshop was small and uncomfortable. The atmosphere always oppressed her, but Eugene would not open the door.

"I never feel alone with you, all alone, if I can see the garden and old Challis's window," he said.

The walls and ceiling were whitewashed. There was a plaster bench, an oil stove, a big cabinet, a couple of stools, a polishing lathe, and quantities of shelves, laden with models of artificial teeth, rolls of paper, boxes, books of memoranda, and the accumulated odds and ends of several months. Mr. Challis was as conscientious as a model housewife in the matter of periodical cleaning.

The conversation of the pair, after preliminary love making, usually opened with Eugene's growing distaste for his work.

"It must be hateful!" said Rose. "My own work is hateful enough, but yours——"

"Oh, mine is infinitely worse!" he interrupted, sitting down beside her and taking her hand. "If I were a man like old Challis it wouldn't matter. He's such a good fellow, quiet, plodding, salt of the earth! But I'm moody, ambitious, at odds with the world. Darling! If you only loved me as I love—as I worship—you!"

"I can't imagine why you consented to be a dentist," said Rose; "it is absurd and incongruous. It jarred upon me from the first. I remember

when Mr. Challis told me you were going to be his assistant——"

"Didn't he say apprentice? Didn't he say I was bound to him for so many years?" interrupted Eugene. "I think Challis is a little proud of it. My grandfather was in his profession, but my father and I hoped for better things. I never dreamed of working at the bench and touching my cap to a man like Challis, but it gives him pleasure. He is my master, you know."

"That is your word, Eugene. I have never heard Mr. Challis use it."

"Can't you read him, between the lines? Don't you understand the petty soul of the man?"

"Eugene!"

His contemptuous words rang with a bitterness that made her stare at him in amazement. They had never before discussed the dentist. If Rose thought of him at all it was as a kind, reliable old friend.

"Oh, the smug respectability of the man!" Eugene went on. "The boredom of his old mother! The weariness of life in this hole of a place! I can't stand it! I can't stand it!"

He spoke like a boy, flushed and panting. She tried to soothe him with voice and hand, and then he knelt down in front of her and clasped her in his arms, with his face pressed against the heart that beat so wildly at his touch. She looked at his closed eyes with pity and a vague feeling of anger against Mr. Challis.

"What do you want to do with your life, dearest?" she said, after silence. "Tell me! Try

to make me understand. Fame—power—wealth—they are all yours if you choose to work for them. I feel it, Eugene. I know it! You're not like other men. You demand so much of the world, and it is in your power to give so much."

"You restore me to life and fill me with confidence," he murmured.

"You are a born speaker—leader of men!" the infatuated girl went on; "I felt it when I heard you in Hyde Park——"

"Darling! That was nothing," he interrupted, lifting his head and smiling at her; "I'm not a Socialist. I don't care a hang about Socialism. I was only amusing myself."

"That very fact proves the truth of my words," said Rose. "If you could do what you liked with a crowd—and such a crowd—when you were only amusing yourself, what could you not do with them when you were in earnest?"

"True! The man of to-day has to appeal to the great heart of the people. There never was such a sentimental age, after all the materialism of the Victorian days. The street corner is the training school for the coming politician. The academic orator is dead as the dodo. Class distinctions, empty forms, education itself is swept away in the broad, ever-widening flood of democracy. The poor are no longer under the heel of the rich. Labour, like a sleeping giant, is shaking off his chains."

Eugene had risen from the ground and was speaking to Rose as if she were at a public meeting, but the absurdity of the situation did not

strike her. No girl is deeply in love who can laugh at her lover, however ridiculous he shows himself to be, when he is in earnest. She looked at him with liquid, flattering eyes.

"You are speaking like a Socialist now, Eugene."

He was a little nettled. She ought to have said Labour Member. His mood changed. He knelt down by her side again, clasping her as before.

"What is ambition to love?" he whispered.

"Our love, Eugene? Is it so great? Will it last for ever?"

"As long as the grass grows! As long as the stars shine!"

There was no future and no past for Rose Leonard, as she listened to her lover's voice, breaking on the words; all hopes, all desires, were crowded in the present hour. She thought no more of marriage than of separation. Her passionate, but pure nature was satisfied with the Springtime of love—the promise, the essence, the dawn.

Their engagement was kept a secret by Eugene's command. He urged his poverty and hatred of the commonplace.

"I could not endure gossip and discussion," he said. "It would lower our trust in each other, brush the bloom from the peach and rob the flower of its perfume."

"Is deception the perfume and the bloom?" said Rose.

"Not deception, my own darling, but Romance."

He was more of a poet, the girl discovered, than

an orator. Rose believed in his genius : a dilettante in poetry ; a rhymers of rubbish nobody read. His little verses charmed her ear, fidgety little triolets and sextains, meaningless sonnets, cut and polished and altered out of all reality of feeling. His rhymes were more indicative of the weak, fitful nature of Eugene than any of his spoken words or active deeds. They were conceived with inspiration, brought forth with some effort of strength, but always ineffectual, poor, disappointing.

Mr. Challis had offended him, beyond forgiveness, by saying that it was better to make good artificial teeth than bad poetry. Eugene and Rose never mentioned the word in his hearing after that, but the dentist did not seem to notice their reticence. He cheerfully read his Tennyson and Longfellow when he had time, and ignored the living poet beneath his roof.

Mr. Challis, when she thought of him at all, filled Rose with amazement. He utterly failed to understand Eugene. Not only his verses, but his views and opinions, made no impression on the thick-skinned dentist. When Eugene talked, Mr. Challis listened. It was only just to acknowledge that he listened, but he never attempted to argue any point with his young assistant, and at last Rose came to the painful conclusion that Eugene's eloquence had the effect of making him sleepy.

He would sit at ease in his old armchair, in the evening, with his bushy eyebrows drawn together and his eyes fixed on the fair, excited face of Eugene. Now and again he murmured a word,

but gradually his head would fall back on the cushion behind him, his eyelids droop, and his big, square hands rest limply, palms upwards, on the arms of his chair.

It struck her, one day, that Mr. Challis looked rather fine when he was asleep. She had never before noticed the vast difference that sleep makes in a face. It is a revelation of hidden things. It mirrors the dignity of death. She appreciated, for the first time, the fine modelling of Challis's brow, big nose, and well-placed ears ; he looked younger ; she could see the splendid shape of his throat as he lay back upon the cushion.

She suddenly felt the appeal that a man's strength makes to a woman—her overwhelming delight in it—that was unlike any emotion she had ever experienced before.

It passed as quickly as it came. She looked at Eugene. For a minute his words were meaningless. She was comparing his face with the sleeping man's, and judging them both. Then the treachery of her secret verdict—in favour of Challis—smote her heart. She adored Eugene !

If Mr. Challis suspected that Eugene and Rose were in love with each other, he did not betray his suspicion by a word or hint. He rarely went into the workshop at the hour when Rose was there, being engaged in the surgery every afternoon. Mrs. Challis never entered it.

At first Eugene had lived with them, but he disliked the restrictions of early hours and was boarding, at this time, with a family in Bayswater. He never invited Rose to the house where he

lived, although she knew, by chance words he let slip, that he was more like a son of the house than an ordinary lodger. That there could be any serious reason for his avoidance of the subject—for she had given him more than one hint of her desire to meet his friends—never entered her head.

She was singularly free from jealousy, for Eugene was a man whose every word and deed suggested indifference to all women in the world, excepting the one. He occasionally hinted, darkly, at the perfidy of men, wondered at lovers' inconstancy, but professed boyish ignorance of evil.

All these qualities endeared him to Rose. Whenever he agitated her or jarred upon her nerves—and even his love-making did that—she reproached herself bitterly. In her girl's phrase, "he was so good!" What of the apparent contradictions in his character? What of his inconsistency and pettish humours? He was so good.

CHAPTER IX

MY brother Perth has left the Wonder Workers!" said Nannie Mordaunt. It was her greeting to Henry Rostron, as he entered the little back room in Colet Street on a cold, December day.

He held her hand for a minute, looking down into her excited face. Then he pulled off his big, fur-lined coat, threw it over a chair-back, and sat down in his accustomed place by the pearl stringer's table.

The silent aunt, on the opposite side, gave him a glance and nod of welcome. They were excellent friends, but they never talked to each other.

"So Perth has left the Wonder Workers, has he? Tell me all about it," said Rostron.

"He left them two months ago, but he didn't let us know!" exclaimed Nannie.

"Oh! Why not?"

"Because he was too proud to confess how they'd fleeced him!" she answered, indignantly.

"It was shocking, Mr. Rostron. Dad says he never heard of such a bad case in the whole of his professional career, and dad has had great experience, of course."

"Great experience of fleecing, Nannie?"

"No, the ways of the show world generally. Perth says that the Headless Man, who managed the Wonder Workers, only paid him his salary once in every three weeks and always borrowed it directly afterwards."

"How did Perth manage to live?"

"Well, we sent him a trifle now and again from home."

"*You* sent it, Nan!" put in the quiet aunt, without looking up from her seed-pearl work.

"It's all the same!" said Nannie, hastily.

"Where is your brother now?" asked Rostron, knowing that she hated to speak of her own generosity.

"He's got an engagement with a new troupe. They have quite a grand act, Perth says, but he thinks it's a little too sensational for London. They tie him up in a sack every evening, then he's burnt to a cinder, and comes out of the sack again as a huge bouquet of real flowers."

"How does he do that, Nannie?" asked Rostron, warming his hands at the fire.

"Of course it's only an 'illusion,' Mr. Rostron."

"Ah! Then it can't be explained. We none of us can explain our illusions, Nannie," said Rostron.

"Except dad—but you're not speaking of a stage illusion, are you, Mr. Rostron? You mean the real thing."

"Yes, if it is a real thing."

Nannie said no more. She had grown so accustomed to his moods as to be able to adapt herself on the instant. It was her all unconscious

charm for him. They would sit together in silence for half an hour at a time. She often wondered what was in his mind as he brooded over the fire, or idly watched her stringing pearls.

She knew that he had retired from service in India, broken in health, at an early age. So much he had told her, and no more, of his private affairs. She little knew and could not readily have understood, his inner character; his thwarted ambition; his devotion to work for ever abandoned; the perpetual struggle of his undaunted spirit with physical weakness and lassitude—all these things were as a closed book to the gentle, ignorant girl. That she consoled and soothed him by the very childishness of her affection never occurred to her mind. He made her happy. That was all she knew.

Henry Rostron, after a long silence, shook off his air of languor and turned round in his chair, leaning both elbows on the table.

"I've been collecting all sorts of curious facts about pearls for you and Miss Grey, Nannie," he said.

"Oh, Mr. Rostron! Have you got time to think of us?" asked Nannie.

"I have too much time," he replied. "That is one of the troubles of life, my child. Time is too short for the man who can work, and too long for him whose work is over. You read poetry, don't you, Miss Grey?"

The quiet aunt looked up.

"I've always admired poetry." (She called it "poytry.")

"Then you must know that the beauty of pearls has been sung all down the ages," he went on. "In the oldest book in the world, said to have been written in China over two thousand years before Christ, there is a mention of pearls. They gleam in Persian verse, and add their lustre to the tales of Palestine. They were taken to Egypt from Arabia. They were the gifts of the East to Italy."

Nannie looked at him with wide-open eyes.

"You seem to be in love with pearls, Mr. Rostron."

"There is only one jewel in the world that is more beautiful, Nannie."

"A diamond?"

"No, a dewdrop."

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"It doesn't last."

"Your pearls do not last," said Rostron. "Do you know that they have been discovered in ancient tombs and crumbled to dust at a touch? Many a fine old ring has nothing to show of its pearls but a little fine brown powder."

Nannie looked at him thoughtfully for a minute, dipping her delicate fingers into a box of tiny beads.

"Does everything that is beautiful pass away, Mr. Rostron?"

"No, but it changes, Nannie."

"Is it always for the better?"

"I believe so. I think so. Look how you have changed yourself since I first knew you!"

Nannie laughed, and even Miss Grey smiled and shook her head.

"I am right," Henry Rostron persisted. "You are much quicker-witted than you used to be. You read and enjoy finer books. You care to look at pictures. Even your work is of more interest to you than of old."

"You are the magician, Mr. Rostron!" she exclaimed. "It is you who have opened my eyes."

He made her a serious little bow, but suddenly left off talking and turned again towards the fire. Presently the quiet aunt went out of the room. Nannie began to pack up her day's work in pieces of tissue paper.

"I wish I could do something to help your brother," said Rostron, "but I know so little of the theatrical world. I can only offer the base, but usually welcome, gift of money. Will you let me do that? It is too bad that your little purse is always open."

"Oh, Mr. Rostron! I couldn't accept any money for Perth. Indeed, it isn't necessary."

"Too proud to let me do anything for you, Nannie? Why not? I take an interest in conjuring and illusions, and all that sort of thing. I've seen the famous rope trick and the mango trick in India. If Perth is really as clever as you imagine, why not let me help him?"

Nannie was embarrassed and pleased. Her usually clever fingers picked awkwardly at the knots in a piece of string. Rostron watched the light blush pass over her face and neck.

"What a sensitive child it is!" he exclaimed. "Won't you give me the pleasure of sending a five

pound note, now and again, to the boy, Nan? It isn't for yourself, you know. Come! Let me speculate in Perth. Let me take shares in your sisterly affection."

"If you put it that way—" she began.

"It's the sensible way," he interrupted, taking his sovereign purse out of his pocket. "There we are! You needn't tell Perth about me. Say you found the money in your own little money-box."

He talked aimlessly for a minute or two, to check Nannie's thanks, but without success.

"My dear child," then he said, "I want you to take everything from me in the same spirit as I give it."

"But, Mr. Rostron, those books and the flowers——"

"Nothing, Nannie, nothing! Passing them on, that's all. Besides, I only asked you to take care of the books for me. I never actually gave them to you, did I?"

"I'm quicker-witted than I used to be!" she repeated his own words, nodding wisely. "So I know what that means."

"Very well, I will allow that you do," he replied smiling. "This is the point, my child. I should like, if it is possible, to add a little pleasure and colour to your quiet life. So much of my time is spent in idleness—enforced idleness—that might be devoted to this scheme. What do you say? Can't we set out together to discover London? Can't you spare one day in the week?"

"To go out—with you!" she asked, a little breathlessly.

"Yes. I will show you all sorts of curious things. You will come back to your pearl stringing like a new girl. Adventures to the adventurous, you know!"

"I should be afraid of boring you, Mr. Rostron."

"You would do me a world of good. You're a very intelligent child, on the whole, Nannie."

They both laughed, but he saw that she was troubled.

"Yes, we will explore London," he went on. "I am almost as ignorant of the city as you are, Nannie, for all my holidays, when I was a boy, were spent in Gloucestershire, and I went out to India at an early age. I know the West End, of course, and something of the East, but the North is a cold mystery, and I have not yet discovered the South."

"I always take a half-holiday on Saturday," said practical Nannie.

"Then we will make Saturday our day out!" he answered.

The slightly troubled expression had not left her face. He suspected the drift of her thoughts.

"You know, Nannie," he said, very gently, "if I were not the man I am, nearly old enough to be your father, odd, eccentric, doing whatever I like without consulting my little world, it might be difficult for me to take possession of you and your holidays in this selfish way. My only motive—our mutual pleasure—might be mistaken by people who did not understand us both."

A frankly puzzled lifting of her brows swept away the troubled expression on her face.

"I mean, Nannie," he went on, "that you need not hesitate to confide in me, and to think of me as a dull old fogey whom it is in your power to cheer and befriend. The debt will be all on my side."

"No, on mine!" exclaimed the girl.

"Well, we'll owe it to each other. This is what we'll do, Nannie. We'll dive for pearls!"

"Into books?" she asked, remembering one of their first talks together.

"No, into houses and streets, museums and theatres, gardens and churches."

"It's very hard work diving for pearls," said literal Nannie.

"So is the task of enjoying oneself, my child," said Rostron. "But we are amateur divers, you know. We'll sit in our canoe, and drift over the surface of life, only taking a plunge into deep waters if we happen to spy a pearl that is too beautiful to be ignored."

"I don't understand half you say, Mr. Rostron."

"That is my fault, not yours, Nannie. I have a trick of thinking half my thoughts and talking the other half. It is one of those things you must learn to tolerate. I shall tax your patience sadly. Do you think you can endure it?"

Nannie did not answer. Her fingers were busy with spools of thread. She did not fully realise as yet the possibility of new happiness that had come into her life, but she was conscious of un-

known elation, a strange and sudden sense of youth and mirth. At last she would enjoy herself like other girls! At last she would share in Rose Leonard's inexplicable delight in sights and sounds away from home. It was very bewildering and exciting.

Then her conscience smote her. She thought of Professor Mordaunt, her mother, and the silent aunt.

"Do you think it is right to enjoy yourself without your family, Mr. Rostron?" she said, already accustomed to laying her little troubles before him.

"Is it possible to enjoy yourself with your family?" he asked; then, perceiving that she had put a serious question—"Yes, change of companionship makes one appreciate his usual surroundings all the more. It's a truism that people like yourself, Nannie, are too apt to forget."

"It is so dreadful to be selfish!" she urged.

"It is so dreadful to think one is indispensable!" he said, mocking her tone. "Colet Street will not fall into ruins, you know, because one little pearl stringer leaves it for half a day."

"I expect not!" said Nannie, laughing at herself.

So they shook hands and parted. There was often a peculiar brusqueness in his coming and going, for at such minutes she was inclined to turn into the ordinary shop-girl, constrained, over-anxious to say the correct thing, and Henry Rostron purposely spared her shyness.

At the door he passed, with a smile and bow,

the girl whom he knew to be Nannie's great friend. The dark beauty of her face, enhanced by a big, flowery hat, had never struck him so forcibly. He had always admired her, but on this particular occasion he was amazed by her bright and triumphant expression; the warmth and glow of youth seemed to radiate from her whole figure.

He felt that her bright word of greeting was entirely impersonal. She was too happy, for some reason known to herself, to discriminate between her friends, but ready to include them all in her minute of joy.

Rose Leonard ran into the room at the back of the shop, and threw her arms round Nannie in a smothering embrace. Her exuberance seemed to sweep over the gentle pearl stringer, making her almost faint in its warmth and colour and rush.

"I have great news for you, Nannie! Wonderful news, darling! Guess what it is. Can you guess? Try, darling!" cried Rose, holding the other girl closely in her arms, taking possession of her, with lips against her cheek. Before Nannie could speak, or even shape her thoughts, Rose went on in gasping, laughing, broken sentences.

"It is about Eugene—of course, it is about Eugene! There is no other man in the world for me, Nannie! He is rich—rich—rich! It's like a fairy story. My fairy prince! It's like the plot of a novel! All his drudgery is over. He will be able to fulfil his dreams. I can't believe it! Can you? Oh, my darling, if you knew how I have longed for this!"

"Tell me what has happened," said Nannie. "I am bewildered and amazed."

"I haven't seen him yet," Rose went on inconsequently. "I heard the news from Mr. Challis."

"But tell me the news," urged her friend.

"Mr. Challis had heard from Eugene this morning. An aunt of his, a woman whom he hadn't seen half a dozen times in his life, died in Scotland last week, and Eugene has inherited all her property! A fortune, Nannie! Isn't it wonderful?"

"How big a fortune? What is it worth?"

"I don't know. I don't know any of the details. Mr. Challis could tell me nothing. He was very pleased, but I'm afraid I was rather unkind to Mr. Challis, Nannie. He seemed to take it calmly and coldly, as if it were the kind of thing to happen every day."

"Did he think it was a big fortune?"

"I tell you, he didn't know. 'Property' and 'fortune' were the words in Eugene's letter—just a scrawl; but Mr. Challis spoke of his habit of exaggeration. Exaggeration, indeed! As if Eugene were not the soul of truth. Perhaps Mr. Challis is jealous. No! It's mean of me to say that. There is nothing petty and jealous about Mr. Challis, for all his old-fashioned ways and antiquated notions."

"Have you heard from Eugene yourself?"

"Not yet."

Rose released her friend, whom she had clasped in her arms all this time, and crossed the room to look in the glass. She pulled the hat-pins out

of the flowery hat, tossed it on one side, and began to pat and pull the coils and curls of her thick dark hair, curving and twisting her slender throat, and smiling at the radiance of her own reflection.

"Of course, he will write to me at once," she said, as if Nannie had repeated her question.

She smoothed her eyebrows with the tips of her fingers, turned her back to the glass, and looked over her shoulders to admire the long, graceful lines of her neck.

"He loves me, Nannie!" she exclaimed, with a sudden change in her voice and manner, all self-consciousness and conceit forgotten in consummate delight. "He loves me! I know it. I believe it. I love him utterly!"

She closed her eyes and swayed backwards and forwards, her hands clasped to her breast, her face turned up, as if her lover were standing in front of her, claiming his own.

The pearl stringer looked at her wonderingly, and with a little fear. Passion was strange and alien to her nature, with all its terrors and its joy, but in the depths of her heart she was stirred by its appeal.

Rose knelt down in front of her, no longer exultant or demonstrative, and hid her face upon her knees.

"Nannie," she said, "you don't know what it means, do you, to love so much?"

"If it makes you happy, Rose——" the pearl stringer began.

"Yes! I am too happy for words! I am too

happy for thoughts! I only want to live for his sake."

She pressed her face against Nannie's neck, and whispered in her ear.

"I want to be his. I want to know—I want to marry him. Give him to me—I pray God, give him to me—and let me die!"

Her words ended in a wild burst of tears. She had dragged herself away from Nannie's embrace and thrown up her hands in prayer, swept away by the passion of her youth and womanhood.

For a minute her gestures—her voice, her face, her whole body—were terrible and beautiful in their utter self-abandonment; unconsciously tragic, elementary, as truly a symbol and a mirror of the great forces of Nature as the wild wind flower is a symbol of the storm, and the shadow of a stream is the mirror of the sweeping clouds.

"Rose!" said the pearl stringer softly. "My dearest Rose!"

With a revulsion of feeling, her eyes shining and lips smiling, while her cheeks were still wet, the passionate girl returned to the shelter of her friend's arms.

"Oh, it is sweet, sweet, sweet to rest here on your heart!" she murmured. "You are so good to me, Nan. The world would be dark without you. Whatever happened to me—if I were wretched and base and vile—I would come to you!"

Gradually the pearl stringer soothed her into silence. She did not echo the words of affection and admiration that Rose poured out, for they were spoken, in spite of their sincerity, with

the exaggeration and sentimentality of her undeveloped, impulsive nature. Nannie Mordaunt felt, without criticising, that time alone could prove their metal.

The silvery splendour of fine friendship is more rare than the glittering gold of quick love.

CHAPTER X

TO understand the source of Eugene Milrake's sudden wealth, and the reason of his unexpected succession to property—"just like a novel!" as Rose Leonard said,—it is necessary to touch on the history of the Milrake family.

The records of nearly every family, given in full, would fill a volume. Judiciously edited, they may be compressed into a couple of paragraphs.

Eugene's wealthy aunt, who had died in Scotland, had been an unmarried lady of eccentric habits and a sense of humour. Eugene was the only relative with whom she had never held any communication.

Having quarrelled with his mother in early life, she had ignored the fact that the boy was her godson, and apparently bestowed all her affection on other members of the family. Some of the nephews and nieces paid her annual visits, with all she corresponded. From them she heard of his school failures, his Socialistic views, and his apprenticeship to a dentist.

Had his kind cousins praised Eugene, instead of abusing him, no doubt they would have made the desired impression on the old lady, but, as it was, the contrariness of her disposition made her secretly regard him with interest and admiration.

She chose to look upon his neglect as independence of spirit, and, the idea having once entered her mind, the mingled humour and spite of making him the heir to her little fortune appealed more and more strongly to the vindictive old dame. It was a secret, shared only with her lawyer, that afforded her unbounded satisfaction.

The affection and attention of all her other relatives were entirely actuated, she believed, by selfish motives. The thought of their disappointment, when Eugene stepped into her shoes, almost reconciled the old lady to the idea of departing from a world she abused and loved. There was one member of the family, in particular, whom she delighted to hint was her favourite and heir, chiefly because he supplied her with tea—she steeped herself in tea—and who ultimately received, having lived on his expectations for many a weary year, the gift of a silver teapot at her death. The knowledge of this bequest in her will added a flavour to every cup of Souchong that she drank at this unfortunate man's expense.

Eugene was elated by his good fortune. He promptly severed his connection with Mr. Challis, and started for Scotland to take possession of his inheritance, chiefly consisting of small house property.

His parting from Rose Leonard was in keeping with their long dalliance—passionate, full of protestations of devotion and faith, but leaving them both unsatisfied and vaguely unhappy.

It was about this time, when she was freed from the agitation and delight of his actual presence,

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that Rose began to feel the mingled satiety and longing of an entanglement with a man of Eugene's temperament.

She told herself that if he had loved her more, or less, she would have been able to act freely, to tear him out of her heart or to marry him at once; her nature was more decisive than his, more transparent; she could not understand the complexity of his feelings, a complexity that makes a man's desire for a woman both stronger and less absorbing than her own.

To Rose it was a simple problem. To meet, to love, to marry—there was her philosophy of life in half a dozen words.

She was as direct in her line of reasoning, as piercing to the heart of things, as the most simple-minded of her sex, for her instinctive knowledge of Eugene's character, and her wilful blindness to all his faults, did not affect in the very least her belief that he was ordained to be her husband.

Choice is inexplicable, she would have argued, and outweighs all other considerations. It is not the result of circumstances, she believed, but their master. The idea that Eugene's love for her was the accident of propinquity, a bright episode in a secretly corrupt youth, would have struck her as too absurd to awaken indignation. They often made each other unhappy and were unsuited in many ways, she acknowledged, but they loved—they loved—that was the beginning and the end of all things.

The weeks of Eugene's absence, when she wrote to him every day, were singularly memorable to

Rose. It was midsummer. She was usually responsive to the blush and bloom of the pride of the year.

The freedom from office work, during her brief vacation, had never been more welcome. Her mother and Mrs. Mordaunt had gone to Worthing for a couple of weeks, so that she was left entirely to herself during the hours when Nannie Mordaunt was at work. Nannie and her aunt usually spent a quiet holiday together later in the year.

It was impossible for Rose to keep away from Bayswater. There was a certain luxury of loneliness in haunting Mr. Challis's garden and workshop. A new assistant was installed in Eugene's place, one of those stolid, dull young men of whom their families boast "steadiness" as an apology for the absence of all other good qualities. Mr. Challis's unwearied patience with this homely youth filled Rose with admiration.

Her old friendship with the dentist had developed into very pleasing intimacy, in spite of his blindness to the perfections of Eugene. Even old Mrs. Challis, over her woolwork, admitted that Rose was an amiable young woman, little suspecting that the absence of young Milrake alone accounted for her long visits to the drawing-room.

Mr. Challis's friends were few and peculiar. He had little time to devote to their entertainment.

It dawned upon Rose, as she grew to know him better every day, that Sydney Challis was a man of far more liberal opinions and wider outlook than she had ever suspected. That he had never taken Eugene seriously, or troubled to argue with him,

was a new interpretation of his behaviour to her lover.

Such an idea never entered her head until she heard him talking politics with one of his old friends. She discovered that he was widely read, but his taste for literature was like his taste in a garden, old-fashioned, fragrant, simple, quaint.

Old Mrs. Challis disapproved of novels, so that Rose was surprised to hear her discussing with her son famous characters in fiction as if they were living, personal friends. Mr. Challis explained, when she questioned him afterwards, that writers like Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray were represented on his shelves as the authors of Works, not novels, and on that account he had been able to persuade the old lady to read them.

It has been said that Mr. Challis's friends were few and peculiar. He numbered among them, oddly enough, Nannie Mordaunt's father. Professor Percy Mordaunt eternally blessed the broken tooth that was the cause of his first entrance into the dentist's house. His favourite topic of conversation, the art of legerdemain, greatly interested Mr. Challis, who listened to the oft-told tale of the little conjurer's professional experiences with almost as much patience as Nannie herself.

It was a remarkable thing to see the Professor, on occasion, producing a billiard ball, or even a live rabbit, from the dentist's pockets. Keeping rabbits, by the way, was the Professor's sole hobby, their brief professional career generally ending in family pie, although Nannie could not be induced to eat them.

Another of Challis's old cronies was a dogged Baconian, who had spent several evenings a month for fifteen years trying to undermine his friend's loyalty to Shakespeare.

A couple of very old gentlemen, who played chess together and never talked, treated Mr. Challis's house very much like a club on the strength of having lent his father a big sum of money, which had been repaid, long before the dentist was born.

An eccentric literary man was a less frequent, but most cordially welcomed, guest. The dentist called him a literary man, but he did not appear to have written anything since the days of his youth; his hands were rather shaky, his clothes were mossy; he recited long poems with exquisite appreciation of their meaning and beauty; his visits usually terminated in a whispered conversation with his host in the hall, when a keen ear could catch the jingle of coins, followed by murmured thanks and faint expostulations.

It was a habit of this derelict of the sea of letters to keep accounts of his expenditure on scraps of paper, which he insisted on the dentist accepting and checking. Mr. Challis showed some of them to Rose. They resembled Falstaff's famous bill at the Boar's Head Tavern, but always ended with "Dessert" or "Bon-bons," instead of bread, "One halfpenny."

A fellow-dentist and his wife; a mysterious, well-bred man whom Mr. Challis had become acquainted with in the train and who kept his address and occupation, for some reason best known to himself,

a profound secret ; a Unitarian minister, whose church Mr. Challis attended ; the silent mother and stolid sisters of the new apprentice completed the list of his personal friends.

Rose lost count of his relations, there were so many of them, and rarely a week passed without the appearance, at a meal, of one or another. Even Mr. Challis himself, entering the dining-room from his surgery, would look puzzled for a minute before advancing with his kind, cordial smile and exclamation of—"Why, it's Aunt Harriet!" or "Cousin Mary!" or "Good old Tom!" as the case might be.

Rose was amused and interested, if a little bored at times, with the Challis household.

She yearned for the return of Eugene. His letters were not satisfactory ; too short ; it must be admitted, commonplace. Her fancy translated the careless, hurried lines into fond and subtle meanings, for she would not confess his evident dislike of letter-writing.

She discovered a peculiar evasiveness in Eugene's personality that made his most attractive qualities fade from the mind, when he was not there to constantly renew the impression.

Distance often blurs the enchantment of the scene. Her eager longing wore itself out. She grew moody, impatient of his willing absence. There never was a girl less fitted to wait in silence. She was too much in love, too absorbed in her own affairs, to look beyond the minute's rapture or despair.

The mere emptiness of the days changed into

desolation. Her pride fell. She wrote to Eugene in abject terms of entreaty.

She felt the drag of the pen in his reply. There was still much to settle with his lawyer. Summer was delightful in Scotland. How he longed for her presence among the heather!

Thus three sides of a sheet of notepaper were discreetly filled, the fourth being devoted to tardy messages to the Challis household and a great flourish of signature. The use of the surname stabbed her. He had always before signed his letters "Eugene." For a few minutes she hated him. Of such trifles is the gaudy fabric of young love woven.

The pearl stringer, who only knew Milrake by her friend's description, smiled at the doubts and fears that haunted Rose. They were so childish. Nannie tried to persuade her out of a sudden determination to avoid Mr. Challis's house.

"It is unreasonable," she said, "and most unkind."

"Don't you understand?" said Rose. "I cannot go there any longer without Eugene! I used to think of him in the rooms, and the garden, and the workshop. He was always with me in spirit."

"He is with you still, surely!" exclaimed the pearl stringer.

"Not there!" said Rose. "He was never really happy in that dull, ordinary house. I ought to have thought of it before. I have displeased him by going to Bayswater day after day, and bored him with all their petty affairs in my long, wearisome letters. How tactless of me, Nannie!"

"I see you will make excuses for Eugene if the roof falls in!" said Nannie.

Rose went no more to Bayswater. Her holiday was over and her mother had returned to town.

All the old dreariness of office work and home anxieties began over again. Mrs. Leonard's pupils were few and literally far to seek.

"Private tuition at their own residences" was unfortunately more popular than attendance at Madame Leonard's Dancing Academy in Colet Street, and there is not much profit in fees of one shilling and sixpence per hour when one considers the expense of journeying to Tooting, Anerley, New Barnet, and other districts on the edge of the map.

Mrs. Leonard's semi-private, semi-professional connection made no appeal to her daughter. The precocious little girls and their proud "Mummies," with endless talk of probable pantomime engagements at Christmas or in Cinema shows, bored her excessively.

She had never been stage-struck, and could not understand her mother's life-long devotion to the occupation of her girlhood. It seemed, in comparison with her own conception of life and love, to be all unreal and ridiculous. She never put her thoughts into words, but her lack of interest was a constant source of annoyance to Mrs. Leonard. They fretted and jarred upon each other, more like a couple of uncongenial sisters than mother and child.

Midsummer drifted into early September.

Rose grew pale and listless, as her lover's letters

became less and less frequent. A strange apathy crept over her, as if she were deadened to all sensation.

On leaving the office she went into Hyde Park, day after day, to sit by herself in some quiet seat, brooding.

Her beauty, which had blossomed in the sunshine of love, faded and changed. Its first radiance was gone for ever, but the expression of her sombre face suggested the struggling growth of new strength of character, the promise of a womanhood that would be strenuous, proud, determined.

One evening, when she noticed the first grey mists of autumn veiling the distant trees and bushes, Rose Leonard was sitting alone in her favourite spot. Over her head the dark boughs of a cedar stirred in a chilly wind; the Serpentine might have been a wide river in the darksome twilight; a few people, scattered over the grass and far-off paths, looked like shadows hurrying by.

The colourless scene, the gloomy silence, even the cold wind, were in harmony with melancholy.

Rose was not happy, but at peace. She could think of Eugene without anger, without passion, with an infinite tenderness his presence had never awakened.

When he came back to her—in her secret heart she had never been a traitor to that belief—they would be able to clasp hands with a knowledge of each other that all the bliss of their first love had not foretold. She would forgive him. No! There was nothing to forgive. She would take him without question, without remorse.

The thought of their marriage, in the quietude of this hour, no longer thrilled her to inexpressible depths and heights. Sympathy, tolerance, the warm affection that keeps the hearth bright and shares the common trivialities, as well as the great moments of life, would be the foundations of her future with Eugene.

She told herself that passion was dead. She would never feel it again. All was well! If her lover had stolen over the grass, as stealthily as the grey mist was stealing, she would hardly have started to her feet at seeing him. The quickening touch of his hands and lips was forgotten in the softness of her present mood.

She saw him, in imagination, standing by her side—Eugene chastened, Eugene refined, Eugene even Platonic—in brief, Eugene as he never had been, and never could be, on this side of the stars.

Rose was so absorbed in her reverie, so possessed with this mental vision, that she did not notice the approach of a man—alas! not Eugene—until he was close beside her. He stopped, with a word of surprise.

She raised her eyes and saw that it was Mr. Challis—dear, commonplace, kind Mr. Challis with his dog at his heels. A good dog, Mr. Challis's Bumble, with short, hurrying legs and hair all over his devoted eyes; curious and self-assertive to a degree, very demonstrative and rather stupid, with his bit of red flannel of a tongue hanging out of his gasping mouth, and his coat all blowing sideways in the wind.

"Rose!" exclaimed the dentist, in a pleased voice. "My dear girl! You haven't forgotten me?"

She was puzzled for a second as they shook hands, and then abashed at his mild reproach.

"I ought to have been to see you, Mr. Challis," she said, quickly. "I'm so sorry, but I haven't been anywhere for weeks——"

"That's all right!" he interrupted, genially. "I was only a little surprised at the manner of your disappearance. It was 'rayther a sudden pull-up, Sammy,' wasn't it?"

There was a vacant chair on the other side of the cedar. Mr. Challis fetched it and sat down. She was very glad to see him. Bumble showed his delight by worrying imaginary rats round about the edge of her skirt.

"This is not a very cheery situation," said the dentist, glancing round. "Are you not cold?"

He laid one of his bare, warm hands over both hers, grasping them easily between his fingers.

"I don't mind if I am cold," she answered, vaguely. "I sit here every day. I am waiting for the winter."

"That's a peculiar statement," observed Mr. Challis.

He looked at her a little anxiously. She was seized with a sudden impulse to confide in him. If only he had appreciated Eugene!

"I try to get a constitutional myself at about this time," Mr. Challis went on, before she had made up her mind to speak. "It is a new rule of mine to knock off work from six to seven. I

wonder I haven't met you before. You will be rejoiced to hear that Thomas is getting on capitally."

"Thomas? Who is Thomas, Mr. Challis?" she repeated.

"My new young man, you know, the lad I took after young Milrake left me."

"Of course! I had forgotten his name," said Rose, still debating in her mind whether she would give him her confidence.

"Thomas is slow, but I can't say Thomas is sure," the dentist continued, in his half-playful, half-serious way. "He made his first complete case of teeth last week—by a case, my dear, we mean a set—but unfortunately, being left entirely to himself, he introduced a canine in place of a central incisor."

While Mr. Challis was enjoying this professional anecdote, Rose had decided to speak.

"Mr. Challis, I want to tell you something about Eugene Milrake," she said, unable to keep her voice from trembling. "Perhaps you have already guessed, for I am sure you must have seen——"

She stopped hesitatingly, for the change in his face both startled and alarmed her.

It was at that minute, and never before that minute, that the remote possibility of his old, loyal friendship evolving into love flashed into her mind. Her quick blood responded to the new, utterly unexpected thought. She felt its rush to throat and brow. For a minute she was bewildered, confused, angry with herself, forgetful of Eugene.

Then she went on, speaking with more confidence, master of her voice.

"I never wanted to be secretive, Mr. Challis, and I'm afraid you won't understand Eugene's motive——"

"Stop, my dear!" he interrupted her in words this time, very gravely, with a certain air of authority that was new in his manner. "Before we talk about Eugene, I must really ask you a few questions. Have you seen him since he returned to London? Have you heard from him?"

Rose did not answer immediately. She returned his steady gaze.

"I did not know that Eugene had returned," she said slowly. "I have not heard from him for a long time."

Mr. Challis nodded his head once or twice, as if he had expected her answer. Then he whistled to Bumble, and stooped down to pull the dog's ears.

"Good old Bumble!" he said. "Good old boy!"

"Mr. Challis!" exclaimed Rose, a little breathlessly, "tell me what you know of Eugene. Where is he? Tell me!"

The dentist raised his head from the dog and looked at her again. He was a little flushed, perhaps with stooping.

"I have seen young Milrake once," he replied, "but he did not come to our house. We happened to meet in the street. He was looking rather ill and worried."

Rose made a little sound of distress. Mr.

Challis seemed to find a sudden point of interest on the distant Serpentine, where he fixed his eyes, frowning.

"I never enjoyed Eugene's confidence," he went on, with a touch of his professional pomposity, "but he talked to me very freely. He appears to be—how shall I put it?—entangled, honourably entangled, he assures me, with a certain young lady——"

"What do you mean?" Rose interrupted, sharply. "Speak plainly, Mr. Challis."

She was amused, even in her perplexity, by the dentist's words.

Eugene had never called her, she was sure, "a certain young lady," or used the absurd phrase, "honourably entangled."

"You see," Mr. Challis continued, more easily, "he has lived in the same house with the girl for so long, the whole family regarding him with affection, that he feels himself bound—those were his exact words—to keep his promise."

Rose had started to her feet. She understood, at last, the halting words. Her pride and her passion struggled for utterance.

"Eugene is going to be married!" she said.

"Yes," said Mr. Challis, bluntly, with his frowning face still turned on the dark line of water.

The girl rested her hand on the back of the chair, for she was suddenly weak and trembling.

"Did Eugene speak of me?" she asked, in a low voice.

"No, no!" Mr. Challis answered quickly.

There was a long silence. Then he turned his head and looked at her with his usual expression of bland, habitual kindness.

"Why should Eugene speak of you?" he asked. "He only talked of himself, as he always does. His fortune seems to have dwindled considerably since we first heard of it. The amount was greatly exaggerated. He thinks of living in Scotland, and devoting himself to poetry—his own poetry, of course. His political ambition has died away. He tells me all political parties are base and mercenary. Well, well, his views were very elementary. I agree with them broadly, as you know, but I think we can manage to rub along without Eugene as our champion."

So Mr. Challis meandered on, with no suggestion of his knowledge of the girl's agitation, except that his hand was clasped again over hers on the back of the chair. Very gradually he drew her round, until she was again seated at his side.

For the minute she was stunned, incapable of realising the full meaning of the news he had told her. She longed for Eugene—childishly—hopelessly—and Eugene was false.

The sky darkened and the night drew near. All love and all delight had gone out of the world.

Rose Leonard, cold and impassive, leaned her cheek against Challis's arm and closed her eyes. She was indifferent to his sympathy. Not a word of her loss and misery had passed between them. She did not know, or care, whether he understood.

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He was a fellow-being, quiet and incu.lous. That was enough.

So, in the darkest hour of her youth, Sydney Challis waited at her side, with the patient, selfless devotion of the secret of his life.

CHAPTER XI

NANNIE MORDAUNT and Henry Rastron rapidly developed into the most daring, but most discriminating, of adventurers.

They were an odd pair, dissimilar in outlook, experience, education, habits, class. The girl was still so young and impressionable, the man so weary of the ease and enforced idleness of his life. The intimacy between them blossomed and bloomed, like a hardy little plant in poor soil. They found so much to say and hear; at least, it was Nannie who found so much to say, and Rostron so much to hear.

Every Saturday afternoon, through that eventful summer, autumn, and winter, Nannie left Colet Street behind her and he forgot Mayfair.

They took it in turns to choose the day's expedition. Nannie believed in free shows, partly to save her friend's pocket—his tact was shown in that he had made her forget he was a very rich man—and partly on the advice of the silent aunt. There is always an attraction in a free show; but only people who earn their own living really understand that.

Museums and picture galleries were no longer imposing, rather dull places, where one wandered

aimlessly from room to room; Mr. Rostron made them interesting, for he seemed like the disguised owner with an intimate knowledge of the best things to be seen. Hampton Court and Kew Gardens belonged to him, and to Nannie, while the London Museum, Soane House, and the Wallace Collection were their own private pet collections, to which they graciously admitted the general public.

They were like children in their love of the Zoological Gardens, rejoicing in all the strangest beasts—the mild, little Tasmanian devil, the liquid-eyed giraffe, the laughing hyena who never laughs, and the great wise elephants.

They ignored guide books, for Rostron taught Nannie to make her own discoveries. Much was lost of useful information, doubtless, in their haphazard wanderings, but much was gained in the delight of surprises.

The Anglo-Indian and the pearl stringer were not the kind of people to tax their memories with the exact number of books in the British Museum Reading Room, or the price that was paid for a Raphael in the National Gallery, or the number of trains that pass through Clapham Junction on Bank Holidays.

When they passed through old St. John's Gate, in Clerkenwell, they thought of the good monks who had built that noble arch. When they came upon Eastcheap, one day quite by accident, it was as if Sir John Falstaff himself had suddenly appeared in the flesh—too much flesh as of yore, hearts of gold!

Many and many a time they stood beside

Mr. Samuel Pepys in the Strand, to watch the milkmaids tripping past, led by their piper—a mighty pretty sight.

A dinner at the Cheshire Cheese meant an evening with Dr. Johnson, who was one of Rostron's oldest friends, while a walk round Soho invariably ended in a dish of tea at the hospitable house of Dr. Burney, and a chat with the sprightly Fanny.

They haunted old Kensington, not so much for its historical interest, as for love of Thackeray, and John Everett Millais, and that other beloved John—John Leech—who once lived there, and Kensington Gardens was dear to them on account of two very different characters—William of Orange, who once dwelt in the palace, and Peter Pan, who still dwells, as we all know, in the secret places behind the flower-beds.

It was Rostron's fault that fact and fiction were thus entangled in thoughts and lives. The precision of the pearl stringer's daily work had given her a certain discipline of mind. Rostron's life in India had developed his quick imagination, estranged him from the ordinary pleasures of men of his world, sport and spending, and simplified his tastes.

He adapted himself to Nannie as she could have adapted herself to a little child, consciously and unconsciously bringing light and colour into her days.

She brought him many confidences, at first shyly and diffidently, but soon with gentle assurance and perfect freedom. Naturally pious and

devout, Nannie talked much of religion. He contradicted none of her good, but narrow, beliefs; she thought that he entirely agreed.

Her little homilies and obvious conclusions, her glib use of the words "pagan" and "heathen" applied to the people with whom he had lived the best years of his life, aroused no impatience or anger in Henry Rostron. He had met with too much ignorance in his masters and rulers to be surprised at the ignorance of a little pearl stringer; but he taught the little pearl stringer, with story and legend, and the inner meaning of story and legend, to be tolerant and broad-minded. It was his own characteristic way of doing it. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the pupil would have missed the application of the childish lessons, but he had not misjudged her intuition.

All their expeditions were not in search of old associations. Nannie's quiet life and Rostron's social position were responsible for a certain ignorance in them both of many phases of modern life.

They went to Hampstead Heath on Bank Holidays, the girl a little alarmed and shocked at the noise and bustle, the man as frankly astounded and interested as if he had discovered a new order of human beings in 'Arry and 'Arriet, H'Emly and 'Orace, Maude and 'Erb.

They went to Brighton by Sunday League Excursion—wondrous day of ripple and sunshine, never to be forgotten by the little pearl stringer.

There was a certain Cinema show, near Charing Cross, where they saw a set of pictures that started

Rostron on tales of his early years in India. He never talked to Nannie about his work, before or after.

They often went to the theatre, in the pit, sometimes in the gallery, but Rostron's choice of plays was very limited. He was not easily bored—the easily bored themselves easily bore—or very critical, but simply indifferent to a silly piece.

When he enjoyed a play at all, he enjoyed it immensely. There was a comedy that he and Nannie knew by heart before he tired of seeing it acted, and a certain West End company whom they saw in every one of their productions two or three times at least.

Music halls wearied him, but he would have gone far to watch a beautiful dancer, and Nannie shared his child-like admiration for juggling tricks, feats of strength, or the amazing performances of acrobats, tumblers, and contortionists.

Now and again they found their Saturday's entertainment in a suburban market, where the stalls are piled with fruit and flowers and vegetables, the latest toys are exploited, refreshing cockles and "tiptop native oysters," at fourpence a plate, tempt the passer-by, and where it is possible to have one's character, past, present, and future life correctly told for a penny—satisfaction guaranteed, or money returned.

On fine afternoons Rostron and Nannie would choose the longest distance motor bus, starting from the Oxford Street end of Colet Street, secure the front seat, and travel to far-distant garden cities and little-known parks. Or they would rush

away by train from bricks and mortar, and wander into open fields, flowery lanes, and darkling woods where the jerry-builder is yet unknown.

On other occasions, in a more social mood, they walked through the West End in the evening, watched the people going into theatres, looked at shops, tramped through Fleet Street, listened to the sob-sob-sob of printing machines down side turnings, and lost themselves in the endless, narrow by-ways of the city.

They became good judges of open-air oratory. It amused her companion to watch Nannie Mordaunt in a street corner crowd, with her mild blue eyes earnestly upturned to the speaker's face, complacently weighing the arguments for Socialism, Anarchy, Free Thought, National Prohibition, as the case might be.

He little suspected that all her attention and interest hung on his approval, that she was never forgetful, for a minute, of his presence beside her.

His beliefs were hers; his advocacy moved her to enthusiasm on the question of Women's Suffrage; his benevolent, good-humoured forbearance taught her patience; his quick observation showed her the possibility of finding pleasure and pathos and humour in every changing scene of the long, uneventful years.

That there was anything unusual or incongruous in their companionship never occurred to Nannie's mind. She was no fool; she had read many novels; but the personality of Rostron, or her own thoughts of him, kept her judgment and her emotion finely balanced.

He made her forget the difference in their social world, but she could not forget the difference in their knowledge and experience.

It was only in stringing pearls that she dared to think herself his equal.

They often talked of Perth, who had become, by adoption, a member of the Tee Family.

The Tee Family, Mr. Rostron learned, consisted of Mr. Tee, a splendid giant of a man whose principal feat was supporting all the other members, at the end of their performance, on his arms, thighs, shoulders and head; "Ma" Tee, famous in her youth as a top-boot dancer, but now devoting her talents to management, wardrobe, and general comfort of the Family: three sons, two daughters, their respective wives and husbands, a nephew, and several adopted boys, including Perth.

Their performance consisted of juggling, jumping seats, bell-ringing, high kicking, and fancy shooting. It was mentioned in their advertisements as a Mad Medley of Mirth, Mr. Tee's object being, to use his own expressive word, "to higher the tone of their particular branch of the show business."

Rostron had the pleasure of meeting Perth, Mr. Tee, and his wife when the Family came to London. He had already made the acquaintance of Nannie's father and mother. He was invited to meet, as Mrs. Mordaunt said, a very select party. Mr. and Mrs. Tee, Rose Leonard, and Rostron himself were the only guests.

Perth, in a well-cut suit, with a cameleia in his buttonhole, was very different from the sulky,

dissatisfied boy who had run away from home. His lank black hair was flattened into a curl on his left temple; his face had grown thin and shrewd; he was inclined to patronise his mother, father, and sister.

Rose Leonard, handsome and moody, did not impress Rostron as favourably as on former occasions, except in the invariable sweetness of her manner to Nannie.

Mrs. Mordaunt and Mrs. Tee rivalled each other in amiability and jewellery. Even Rostron, accustomed to the sight of diamonds, rubies, and emeralds, was dazzled by the appearance of Mrs. Tee, who wore spangled black net over orange velvet, and a perfect constellation of diamond stars on her breast, while her elaborately curled brown hair was adorned with a sparkling crescent moon in front and a huge turquoise-studded comb behind. Mr. Tee, perhaps as a foil to his wife's splendour, had come in a glossy broadcloth suit, known as his "blacks."

Professor Percy Mordaunt, the little conjurer, presented an unconventional appearance in a swallow-tail coat, one of the relics of old days, and a pair of striped grey trousers. Rostron wondered what his sister-in-law, who loved all her fellow-beings at a distance, would have thought of the costumes of the party.

It touched and pleased him to see Nannie's pride in her brother and her brother's friends. He determined to play his part well, but conversation was a little difficult.

Rose Leonard was almost as silent as Perth.

She made Rostron think of a big, purple, velvet-petalled tulip he had seen in Kensington Gardens on his way to Colet Street. The girl, flaunting her dark beauty, seemed as indifferent as a flower to her surroundings.

The silent aunt devoted all her attention to the commissariat. Mr. Tee meandered through a long, pointless story about a couple of his friends whom he called, from their professional occupations, "Clark's Dogs" and "Parker's Crocodiles." Rostron, unable to make head or tail of the story, followed Professor Mordaunt's lead with exclamations of "By Jove!" or "You don't say so!" at intervals.

The silent aunt's announcement that high tea was ready had a most stimulating effect on the spirits of the company.

Rostron, a little uncomfortable by having Miss Grey wait on him, had the honour of sitting next to Ma Tee. Professor Mordaunt was almost hidden behind a York ham at one end of the table, Mrs. Mordaunt behind a gigantic tea-cosy, like an eiderdown quilt, at the other.

There was a plate of big pink prawns—a prawn, as we all know, is a delicacy, while a shrimp is a vulgarity—and brown bread and butter, water-cresses, radishes, heavy home-made cake, and light pastrycooks' tarts.

The merits of the ham, with reminiscent remarks on hams in general, absorbed the conversation for some time, a subject on which Rostron found himself incapable of throwing any new light. This was followed by such topics as the weather, past, present, and to come, the Royal Family,

recent murder mysteries, fashions in ladies' dresses, and anecdotal matter of the younger generation of Tees.

After the table had been cleared by Nannie and her aunt, the talk became entirely professional.

"I suppose you're not one of us, are you, sir?" Mrs. Tee asked Rostron, who had been the object of her curiosity since he was introduced.

He admitted his ignorance of the show world.

"P'raps you're in trade or one of the learned profession?" queried the lady.

"I was in the Indian Civil Service, but I have retired," replied Rostron, good-naturedly.

"Ah! India's a wonderful country," observed Mr. Tee. "There isn't much about India that I don't know."

"You've been to India then?" asked Rostron, in some surprise.

"No, I've not been there as yet," said Mr. Tee, "but I'm acquainted with a man—you know, Ma, Tommy Porter—who has a troupe of real live Indians, and he's told me all about 'em. Queer chaps! Most peculiar in their ways—but harmless, you know, quite harmless. Is that your experience of 'em at home in their own country, sir?"

"Personally, I have always found them harmless," said Rostron, gravely.

"Then there's Burmah," continued Mr. Tee, "there's another most extreeordinary place. An old friend of ours—you know, Ma, one of the Frickers—had a team of Burmese ball-players over here a while ago. They gave a very neat little turn. They was 'topping the bill' when

we were last in Hanley. My friend's great difficulty was in keeping 'em warm. He treated them very generously, to be sure. They all had fur coats, hot-water bottles and what not, but they weren't really grateful. I've seen 'em behind the scenes, when the stage was a bit draughty, with their teeth chatterin' in their heads. That wasn't a nice return, you know, for all my friend's kindness."

"You've got to make allowances for the poor heathens, Teddy," said his wife. "Besides, they were all tattooed, and p'raps that made them feel the cold more."

"I hate tattooing," said Perth, "it's a low down way of getting your living."

Mrs. Tee burst into a loud laugh. Perth looked at her with his old, morose expression. He thought she was laughing at him. It was several minutes before she could make herself intelligible.

"D'you remember the poor lady we met at that little town in North Wales, who'd been tattooed when she was a girl, Teddy?" gasped Mrs. Tee.

"I don't consider it's a laughing matter, my dear," answered her husband, severely.

"Let us be the judges of that," said Professor Mordaunt, in his pompous little way.

"Well, it seems this poor lady had belonged to some sort of a troupe when she was a girl," said Mrs. Tee. "Her mother had had her tattooed. It was beautifully done, wasn't it, Teddy?"

"The most artistic work I've ever come across," agreed Mr. Tee,

"There was the Union Jack on one of her arms and the Stars and Stripes on the other," continued Mrs. Tee. "Then there was birds and bouquets of flowers and anchors all over her; but the best of all was a group of notabilities on her back—famous men done from photographs, all as life-like and serious as judges. The poor lady was a great favourite wherever they showed."

"At fairs and vulgar 'shops' like that, I suppose?" put in Perth.

"Mostly at country fairs," said Mrs. Tee. "Well, after a time she retired into private life. Then her family had reverses—we all have our ups and downs in this world—and she determined to go back into the show business. There was her tattoos as good as ever, *but the poor lady had grown stout!*"

Again Mrs. Tee was choked with laughter, but the company failed to grasp the joke.

"Can't you imagine how she looked?" cried Mrs. Tee. "The beautiful tattooing was all stretched, and the group of notabilities on her back was every one of 'em on the broad grin!"

Mrs. Mordaunt was greatly shocked, even the Professor murmured that such stories were hardly—hardly—but Rostron and Perth joined in Mrs. Tee's amusement, while Mr. Tee repeated that the poor lady deserved their sympathy.

Nannie caused a diversion by asking her brother to entertain them.

Perth, who had practised unceasingly since he left home, delighted Rostron with his grace and skill. He juggled exceptionally well, and ended

his performance by displaying a pretty little illusion of his own invention.

"That boy's going to make his mark!" said Mr. Tee, solemnly, when Perth left the room with his paraphernalia. "He's got ambition and he's got ideas. That's what we want in our business."

"And strict sobriety, Teddy, on and off," added Mrs. Tee.

"Quite right, Ma. You'd be surprised what a lot of our boys don't drink alcohol in any form, sir," said Mr. Tee, turning to Rostron; "that's one of the advantages of young fellows taking up the business. If you're an acrobat, or an equilibrist, or a fancy shot, you're bound to have a steady hand and a straight eye. Could you do a Risley Act yourself, sir, if you was a guzzler?"

"I'm sure I couldn't," said Rostron, with a smile, "although I have no idea what you mean by a Risley Act."

"Don't you though?" asked Mr. Tee, incredulously. "And you're a gentleman of travel too! A Risley Act is lying on your back and juggling with your feet—big objects, you know, such as children or beer barrels. It's a pretty act. I suppose you know what fancy shooting is?"

He asked the question a little anxiously, dreading to expose the depth of Rostron's ignorance.

"Oh, yes! I'm not a bad shot myself," said Rostron.

"Then you'd appreciate my son Alf's performance in our Medley," said Mr. Tee. "He can do

the most extraordinary things with the rifle, can't he, Ma? We've got the front taken out of an upright grand piano, a two hundred guinea instrument, and he plays 'Rule Britannia' by shooting at the strings."

"It takes rather a long time, doesn't it?" asked Rostron.

"Don't you fret!" exclaimed Mr. Tee. "He plays it nearly as quick as you could whistle the tune. A couple of the girls pass him the rifles and he's never struck a false note yet. There's a musician for you! He's working out a very tasty little idea of his own just now. He's going to have a lady, in full evening dress, come on to the stage and then shoot off her head."

Mrs. Mordaunt gave a little squeal of horror, and even Rose Leonard, lounging in her chair, took a momentary interest in the conversation.

"Isn't there a chance of the supply of ladies falling off?" asked Rostron.

"I mean, sir," explained Mr. Tee, gravely, "my son will take aim at visiting cards, sixpenny pieces, and other small objects placed on top of her coiffeur. It requires great nerve."

"On the part of the lady?"

"No, sir! All she's got to do is to sit still and smile."

"She might be shot!" cried Mrs. Mordaunt.

"And if she was, who would suffer by it most?—my son!" answered Mr. Tee. "He's responsible for the proper working of the act. We needn't waste our sympathy over the lady, whatever happens. Your point of view, Mrs. Mordaunt, reminds me of

a cousin of mine who went in for lion taming. He engaged a man to travel and look after the 'props,' and the feller refused to groom two young tigers because it wasn't mentioned when he took the job! Who suffered for it when those two young tigers entered the arena looking as shaggy as sheep dogs?—my cousin, not the man. Nobody blamed *him* for shirkin' his duties, but the management slanged my cousin for not putting his beasts into the ring as smart as they was represented in the printing."

Nannie again quelled the rising storm—for she knew from Perth that Mr. Tee was a man of hot temper—by asking her father to show them some conjuring tricks.

Professor Percy Mordaunt, nervously pulling at his big, wiry moustache, protested that he was too modest, too much of an old fogey, to display his trifling knowledge of legerdemain to such leading members of the profession as Mr. and Mrs. Tee.

There was much good-natured entreaty before he could be induced to fetch the old, mysterious box containing his treasures. The little black wand, although it had lost all its old power to deceive—"hopelessly out of date," as Perth whispered to his sister—seemed to have a magical effect on the poor Professor. He became animated and cheerful; his large, protruding eyes glistened; he rolled up his sleeves—"No deception, ladies and gentlemen"—with all the gusto and self-possession of his youth.

The behaviour of Mr. and Mrs. Tee impressed

Rostron very pleasantly, for it displayed a delicacy and consideration that are the foundation of all good manners. They loudly applauded the Professor's obvious little tricks, laughed uproariously at his simple and silly patter, and expressed as much astonishment when Mrs. Tee's gold bracelets were discovered in the lining of Mr. Tee's silk hat as if they had never even heard of such a feat. Perth, on the other hand, treated his father's efforts with supreme contempt.

When Rostron caught Nannie's eyes, as he glanced at her on the other side of the room, she looked at him long and earnestly, trying to discover his real opinion of her father's skill. He smiled reassuringly, and the almost imperceptible blush he knew so well passed over her features. She turned her eyes away, satisfied and happy.

It was an easy matter, having once begun, to persuade the Professor to give them, in Mrs. Tee's words, "a specimen of his ventriloquial accomplishments."

Retiring for a few minutes to make preparations, he returned in the character of Lieutenant Mordaunt, in an old blue jacket with brass buttons, and a peaked naval cap.

His dolls—all ventriloquists' dolls bear a ghastly resemblance to jovial human beings—were three in number, a sailor boy, a coster, and an old countrywoman. The movements of the muscles of the Lieutenant's throat were plainly visible when he "threw" his voice, and the antiquity of his jokes reminded Rostron of his childhood, when he had a

faint recollection of hearing the same kind of thing at children's parties.

He would not have said such a thing for the world, for Nannie's admiration of her father in the character of Lieutenant even exceeded her pride in his professorship. Rose Leonard looked wistfully from her friend to Rostron, at the end of the performance, as if she understood the reason of his loud applause.

The quiet aunt had been absent from the room during the Lieutenant's lengthy turn. The reason was explained by her return with the tray, laden with glasses, knives, spoons, forks—the light artillery, as it were, of the advancing arm of supper, to the dismay of Rostron, who had thought that high tea was the last meal of the day.

He soon found himself, however, passing plates of ham, still in good condition and fresh garnished with parsley, after the severe attack it had encountered a few hours previously; cold beef, sandwiches, and bright pink jelly. He ate little, although Mrs. Tee became very eloquent on the necessity of keeping up one's strength. Her husband argued that sedentary occupations did not exhaust the vitality, "use up your fuel," as he expressed it, like physical labour.

Lieutenant Mordaunt did not agree. Ventriloquism was wholly intellectual, but he never felt more hungry than he did after practising that branch of his art. Rose Leonard professed complete indifference on the subject. The silent aunt, pressed for an opinion, betrayed her feminine weakness for strong tea; adding that she liked

to see people enjoy their food. All the company seemed anxious to gratify her on that point.

Mrs. Tee summed up the argument, as if it were a public debate, by recounting her own experiments in diet when she was engaged in an occupation that required, as she emphatically declared, equal exertion of mind and body—top-boot dancing.

Nannie said little. She was tired of the loud voices and laughter. She felt, in spite of Rostron's adaptability, that the brightness of their friendship was blurred by an attempt at intimate association. It was a subtle feeling she could not have put into words, and did not affect her loyalty to her own people or her admiration of her brother's new friends.

When she parted from Rostron that night, at the street door, he was surprised to feel that her hand trembled and her eyes were filled with tears.

"My dear child!" he exclaimed; "are you not well? Unhappy? What is the matter, Nannie?"

"I'm very well, and very happy," she answered. "There are such things as tears of joy, Mr. Rostron, and of deep gratitude."

"Serious little person! Are you so deeply grateful to the Tee family? Perth deserves everything they do for him. The boy is amazingly clever," said Rostron.

"Thank you, Mr. Rostron. You always make me so hopeful and proud."

Impulsively, before he guessed her intention, she lifted his hand and touched it with her lips.

"My dear child!" he exclaimed for the second time; "you must never do a thing like that."

Then he bade her good-night, very kindly, and went away.

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CHAPTER XII

ROSE'S reflections, after the party, were decided and characteristic. The kind-hearted Tees, she thought, were atrociously vulgar; Perth was a coxcomb; Mr. and Mrs. Mordaunt were ridiculous; and Mr. Rostron was dull. She was too fond of Nannie to include her in the criticism, and she always forgot the existence of the silent aunt.

She wondered what her friend could see in Henry Rostron. He was so very dull. He was even more dull than—— She checked the words, although they were only spoken to her own image in the glass.

It was ungrateful and ungracious to disparage Mr. Challis, even in thought, after all his goodness and sympathy. So much the unhappiness of the past few months had taught her, if nothing more. She had not confided in Mr. Challis, perhaps because he had not sought her confidence. The name of Eugene Milrake had not been spoken between them since the afternoon of their meeting in Hyde Park.

Rose had kept her own counsel. Baffled love—hate—revenge—yearning had spent their fury in long and secret fits of weeping. It is only in the youth of womanhood, forgotten in the passing of

years, that the flame of passion burns so purely and leaps so high.

Rose had seen Eugene—once; he had not seen her. She had written to him—once; he had not answered.

The slighted girl imagined, quite unreasonably, that blind, inexplicable Fate had parted her from her lover. At times her anger flamed against Eugene; at times she pitied him; at times she thought of him as a thief who had robbed her of himself. Her sense of possession was outraged. She had thought of him for so long as her own—her future husband; as bound to her in honour as if there had been the marriage tie between them.

Why had Eugene failed her? What did it mean? She could not pluck out the heart of his mystery. How could she believe, or even guess, that the great romance of her youth was a mere incident in the youth of Eugene? He had loved her, it is true, and it was a love that haunted and troubled him; but there were numberless reasons for his marriage with another woman.

His wife was the only daughter of the people with whom he had lived; a soft and clinging creature, but possessed of a certain quiet tenacity and stubborn will; devoted to Eugene, and none the less devoted because she understood, as Rose had never suspected, the inconstancy and weakness of his character.

His clandestine courtship of this girl was of earlier date than his friendship with Rose; for a time he had successfully played with them both,

but the jealousy of his old love, combined with their daily companionship, had gradually drawn him away from the new.

On returning to London, after his long absence in Scotland, he found that his secret treachery had been discovered. His conduct towards the daughter of his old friends, seen in the fierce light of their indignation, appeared monstrous.

The girl was very young. That she herself had betrayed the secret flirtation to her people did not enter his mind. She had never seemed so loving, so dependent, so guileless before. Her tears, her flattery, and the loss of his own self-esteem swept him, for once, into definite action. Less than a month after his return from Scotland he was married.

On the one occasion when Rose had seen him, a few days before the marriage, he was strolling with his bride through one of the big West End shops. She saw them in the distance, and instantly drew into a shadowy corner, where she stood, unnoticed, till they passed her by.

The girl was a blonde, taller than her lover, with a quantity of flaxen hair, and a round, pretty, rather foolish face, spoilt by the rabbit-shaped mouth, but clear-skinned, and in the very bloom of youth.

She stared about the shop with big, delighted eyes. Eugene was obviously bored; but when she touched his arm, to draw attention to this trifle or that, he answered smilingly, willing to linger as long as she pleased. Once, as she stooped over a counter, Rose saw him look her

up and down from head to foot, with the quick, inquisitive scrutiny she knew so well.

Had she dared, Rose would have stepped out of the shadows and faced them, but her heart was beating too stormily. She could not have spoken a word. Her mouth felt parched, and there was a sharp, sudden pain across her forehead—a physical numbness that would have been relieved by a burst of tears.

They drew nearer; she could hear their voices; a little crowd came between; they were passing; they were gone.

With the self-control of pride and a sense of deep injury, Rose turned her steps in the opposite direction and walked quickly out of the shop. She was revived by a rush of cold air at the swinging doors.

She had longed and dreaded to see him. The worst pang was over. From that day she never spoke of him again, even to the pearl stringer.

Eugene Milrake had passed out of her life.

The winter which followed that memorable, most unhappy summer was full of petty cares and real anxiety for both Mrs. Leonard and Rose. They were obliged to leave Colet Street for cheaper lodgings. Nannie would have lowered the rent, but she was overruled by her parents and the quiet aunt.

Mrs. Leonard, always inclined to exaggerate every little ache and pain, sank into a state of despondency and fretful ill-health. Her only pupils, three unfortunate little girls, were the principal victims of her irritability, and cried so much

during the dancing lessons that their three little handkerchiefs had to be frequently spread out to dry on the back of a chair.

It chanced to be a particularly foggy year, and Mrs. Leonard hated fog. Rose was one of the many workers who suffered from a dull season, being discharged from the office where she had been engaged for several years as typist and shorthand-writer. She had some difficulty in securing another situation, where the salary was smaller and the hours longer.

Mr. Challis's advice and friendship became more necessary to her every month. Embittered and saddened by the disillusion of her first love, she shrank from the idea of a second, although she knew perfectly well that the minute in Hyde Park, when she had seen her old friend was beginning to love her, had been a true revelation.

Mr. Challis was not at all sentimental. Rose accompanied him, now and again, on long country walks. Walking was his favourite recreation. He told her many stories of his professional experiences, long stories, full of details, and without much point. When she could not go with him he went alone, and apparently enjoyed himself just as much.

The pearl stringer, accustomed to the whimsical, fitful talk of Henry Rostron, would have found the dentist a dull, but singularly restful, companion.

There were times when Rose, tramping at his side, was chafed and irritated by the very qualities that made her fond of him—his even temper,

his moderate views, his transparent honesty and frankness.

There was no subtlety about him. He was like the landscape itself, always the same—she knew it by heart—trees, fields, hedges, lanes! Her melancholy eyes were blind to the lovely curve of the grass in the wind, the ever-changing, veiled glory of the heavens, the lights and shadows of the mystic trees, the springing flowers of the living earth.

So the autumn shivered into winter, and the winter into spring.

It was nine months since Rose had seen, or heard of, Eugene Milrake. The old boredom of her days, before his advent, was intensified by her inability to live in the present or the future. The slowly fading past held, for her, all the brightness and excitement of the world.

Contentment, forgetfulness, ordinary ease of mind and body, had become her aim and ideal. She envied and wondered at the pearl stringer, who was satisfied with the love of her family and the friendship of Henry Rostron.

She gave up the pleasure of looking in shops, or buying little pieces of finery. The austere life of a nun appealed to her strongly at this time, for she was quite genuine in her belief that marriage was not her vocation. Always an egoist, she enjoyed her secret resignation of the dreams of opening womanhood—the lover, the husband, the child—but the enjoyment was tempered by many a poignant stab.

The cruel and convincing realities of poverty

began to shadow all her thoughts. Mrs. Leonard's ill-health increased. The last of her pupils, the three overworked little girls, were taken by their mother to a more encouraging teacher.

Rose, shocked and alarmed by her mother's wasted and miserable appearance, suffered the pangs of self-reproach. She bitterly regretted their petty quarrels, and surprised Mrs. Leonard by unusual patience and consideration.

Then, after the Easter holidays, she was dismissed with a week's notice from her ill-paid, but apparently stable, situation.

Who can fully realise, except from personal experience, the anxieties and disappointments of that harassing ordeal—looking for work in London?

Putting aside the tragedy of the unsuccessful man, with wife and children dependent upon his earnings, and the woman whose responsibilities are often as heavy a burden, it is painful enough to think of the self-dependent girl.

She answers numberless advertisements, making one of dozens seeking the same post. There is the cheerful start from home in the morning, the weary return at night; the long tramp to save a penny in fares; the daily wear and tear of shabby clothes that are still "her best"; the rebuffs and brusque dismissals; the long waiting and the short interviews with men who are too busy, or too callous, or too thoughtless to remember that women are sensitive beings, for all they have learned to hide it; the insolence and curiosity of the human watch-dogs at business doors; the ever-

springing hope, baffled again and again, and the bright days of youth darkened with bitter disappointments.

Ill luck pursued Rose Leonard. She missed two situations by the merest accidents; an attack of influenza held her captive for a couple of weeks; her good references seemed as valueless as the paper they were written on. She borrowed some money from Nannie Mordaunt to pay actual necessities, for her own scanty savings were reserved for weekly rent.

The method of pawnbrokers was added to her stock of worldly knowledge, and she practised a severity of diet that would have won the admiration of the most rigid advocate of the simple life.

Her unhappiness of the past year seemed, in the growing terrors of poverty, strangely unreal. She wondered at herself, little knowing that the deadening of emotion is one of the worst results of sordid cares.

Her mother lost hope. Rose was haunted by a vague dread. Women have been known to kill themselves in the moody fits of depression that swept over Mrs. Leonard at more and more frequent intervals. The girl began to watch her stealthily when they were together, to think of her perpetually when they were apart. It was a new trouble added to life, none the less acute for being indefinite.

Nannie Mordaunt was neglected by her friend. The pride that kept Rose away, concealing the desperate straits to which she was reduced, was incomprehensible to the pearl stringer Nannie,

in sorrow or in joy, in good or ill fortune, would have clung to her friends, for there was no pride at all in her simple nature.

More sensitive than Rose in many ways, she had none of Rose's fear of pity, or instinctive desire to hide her misery from her fellow-beings, as the wounded animal creeps into solitude to die.

Leaving the poor lodgings where they had lived since their departure from Colet Street, Mrs. Leonard and her daughter drifted into one of those hopeless little back streets that seem to hide themselves, for very shame, from the sight and knowledge of the Londoners who know of their existence, but persistently ignore them. They hired a back room in a house occupied by three other sets of lodgers, not counting the kitchen and the attics.

Rose was possessed by a feeling terribly near to despair. It is no exaggeration to say that she would have done anything in the world, at this time, for the sake of money.

Terrible thoughts that she never put into words became habitual to her; they haunted her day and night; she calculated desperately but calmly the price that a woman pays who is willing to sell her youth and virtue. She wondered how it was done. In her innocence it was the idea of the first step that appalled her most—the lingering in the street, the awful approach of the unknown man, the bargain of hell to be driven between them—then her heart sickened and recoiled. She free herself from these thoughts. The left an indelible mark upon her character,

brushing away the bloom of girlhood, but deepening her pity and knowledge of humanity.

Let those who have suffered hunger and fear, let those who have learned their own weakness or strength in the ordeal of misery, be the judges of Rose Leonard if she fell, in thought and desire, from the ideal of womanhood—no others will understand her temptation and her triumph.

She was lost to Nannie Mordaunt. The pearl stringer, seeking her at the old lodgings, could obtain no information of whither she had fled. Mr. Challis was equally bewildered. They became friends at once in their mutual anxiety.

Henry Rostron, summoned to their counsels, sympathised, but did not share in their surprise.

"'Adventure' was written on your friend's brow," he said to Nannie. "A stormy girl! She is not for the quiet home and sheltered ways that suit you, my little pearl stringer. Trust her! She will come back to you."

"But she is poor, and her mother is ill, and I know that she is unhappy," said Nannie, her eyes slowly filling with tears she could not check.

"I will find her!" said Mr. Challis, in his decisive voice. "You needn't be too unhappy, Nannie. By my own effort—by luck or chance—somehow I will find her. I know it."

"You have great faith in yourself," said Rostron, with a smile.

"Not a bit! Not a bit! I have great faith in the goodness of God. He will not desert us."

Mr. Challis spoke with a simple earnestness that appealed to his companion. He looked at

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the dentist keenly for a minute—the broad, benevolent forehead, the kind, friendly eyes, the strong lines of the mouth and chin that were not hidden by the well-trimmed beard—and then his eyes ran over the big, but not ungainly frame, broad-shouldered, upright, well-poised.

"He's a man!" thought Henry Rostron.

CHAPTER XIII

THERE never was a man less adapted to assume the character of a romantic, private detective than Sydney Challis.

He had promised Nannie to find her friend. His methods of setting to work were far too simple and straightforward to be exciting, although his professional duties obliged him to start out on his quest at an hour when the mystery of night was stealing over the city.

The last house where Mrs. Leonard and her daughter were known to have lodged was naturally the place that he first sought.

It was a mean, depressed-looking house, with a crowd of children playing about the steps. His loud knock at the door brought out an old woman, who, somewhat to his surprise, beckoned him into the passage, and promptly opened an inner door, disclosing a bedroom and some person in bed. Mr. Challis backed away.

"Come in! Don't stand there makin' a draught. Come in, can't 'cher!" she said, with asperity.

Mr. Challis firmly declined, and explained his errand.

"Ain't 'cher the doctor?" exclaimed the old woman.

"No! Certainly not!" replied Mr. Challis.

The old lady, slamming the door on the unfortunate patient, looked him up and down with great contempt.

"Drat 'cher!" she exclaimed. "What 'ave yer got on a top 'at for? Get out with yer!"

Her indignant voice summoned a second woman from the end of the passage, to whom he addressed his inquiries.

"It's all right, Mrs. Moss. I'll look after the gentleman," said the second woman.

But it took a few minutes to induce the irate old lady to retire to her own room.

"Confound 'is cheek! What does 'e mean by wearin' a top 'at if he ain't the doctor?" she repeated.

The other woman could give Mr. Challis no information about Mrs. Leonard. They were always changing lodgers, she said, but remembered the young lady and her mother as "good lets, who paid their rent on the tick."

As disappointed as Nannie had been before him, Mr. Challis left the house, followed by the taunts of the old lady, who hung out of window in a perilous manner, regarding his insolent assumption of the silk hat privileges of the medical profession.

Returning to Bayswater through Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens, with a faint hope of finding Rose in one of her favourite spots, Mr. Challis sketched out a plan of campaign.

There were several questions to settle. What style of work would she try to get, failing a post

as typist and shorthand-writer? Where would she expect to find cheap lodgings? Had she any friends, unknown to Nannie, to whom she would apply for help or advice?

He decided the last question in the negative, but made it his business to go to the office where she had lately worked to interview the girls who knew her. None of them could give him any help.

He was certain she had not left London. With Nannie's help he was able to discover the whereabouts of many of Mrs. Leonard's late pupils, only to be again disappointed.

Mr. Rostron thought that the stage would probably attract a girl in Rose's position, and Perth Mordaunt, who was fulfilling an engagement in London with the Tee Family, was commissioned to haunt agents' offices, and theatres where there were likely to be "voice trials."

Rostron himself, touched by Nannie's anxiety, paid for advertisements in the personal columns of several newspapers, and searched for the missing girl in West End streets. He was convinced, like Mr. Challis, that neither she nor her mother would go far from the place where they had lived all their lives.

The dentist, perhaps owing to his own conservatism, clung to the idea that Rose would not give up her old employment. He always saw her, in imagination, bending over the keys of a typewriter.

He changed his hours for seeing patients, at great inconvenience and some loss, to enable him

to reach the city at the time when typists left the business offices.

The apparent hopelessness of his quest did not appal Mr. Challis, although he looked in vain, as the stream of girls filed past him, for the stormy, fitful beauty of the face he knew so well.

A month—two—three—months went by. Nannie Mordaunt had received a letter, a few hurried lines of affectionate greeting, with no address, but the West Central post-mark.

This narrowed the dentist's search to one part of London, so far a point gained, but it gave him no clue as to her occupation or the reason of her secrecy.

If he were discouraged he never showed it. Rostron was surprised at his unbounded confidence in ultimate success.

The two men became, not intimate friends, but very cordial and considerate to each other. The dentist dined once or twice with Rostron at his chambers in the Adelphi, where he had never taken Nannie.

From Mr. Challis she learned that Henry Rostron was a widower. There was a portrait of his wife, the dentist told her, hanging in the study where they talked.

It had never occurred to the pearl stringer that her friend had been married, any more than it had occurred to him to tell her. She realised in the knowledge, with an unexpected feeling of pain, how little she knew of his life, how little she could understand, and how little she could give.

Her thoughts centred upon his wife, with a strange pity. He had loved her, and she was dead.

In all their future companionship, in the minutes when she was most frank and open with Rostron, Nannie Mordaunt never lost the consciousness of a secret that was only a secret in her unspoken sympathy, her yearning over his sorrow that she could not share, and her tenderness for a woman whom she had never seen.

It was little wonder that Mr. Challis, for all his cheery optimism, relied upon Nannie's encouragement, more and more, in his weary search. She could not hide her trouble as he did, but she possessed the gentle voice, the tactful patience, the quiet courage, the essential qualities of the woman whom men reverence.

The fourth month of his search opened in torrents of rain. Day after day, from morning till night, the wind howled and the tempest raged.

All London looked drenched and wretched. The last leaves were lashed from the blackened trees and drifted, brown and sodden, into the overflowing gutters at the edge of the roads. Lights flared, early in the afternoons, in houses and shops; windows and doors were mud-splashed and dingy; the whole city was wrapped in gloom and darkness.

Mr. Challis, with the collar of his big overcoat turned up to his ears, and his umbrella trickling a line of water behind him, turned into one of the overcrowded, hot, uncomfortable teashops to be found near Tottenham Court Road.

The windows were steaming and there was a mingled smell of coffee, wet clothes, tobacco, and exhausted air.

He edged his way to an empty table in a corner of the big room, hung up his hat and overcoat, and sat down to rest. He was very tired and depressed, or the bad atmosphere of the place would have driven him out again. He loved fresh air, open windows, light and colour.

A waitress brought him a pot of tea and a scone. It was a busy time, and he noticed how the place was under-staffed. All the girls looked harassed and anxious. An irritable man, at the next table, struck the bell half a dozen times. A little boy on his mother's knee, within sight of cakes that he could not reach, began to cry lustily, refusing to be shaken or caressed into quietude.

Mr. Challis poured out the tea and buttered his scone. He was suddenly conscious of being very hungry. It was past seven, and he had left home, after a hasty lunch, at one o'clock.

One of his old friends, the impecunious literary man, believed he had discovered Rose Leonard working in a steam laundry in South London. Mr. Challis, who rewarded him generously for any suggestions, had spent the afternoon exploring, without success, the particular steam laundry in question and all the other laundries he could find in the neighbourhood.

More disappointed than he would confess, for the literary man had been ready to swear he had seen Rose, Mr. Challis fully realised for the first time the difficulty—he refused to use the word

hopelessness—of the task he had set himself to accomplish.

He asked himself the question, What would Eugene Milrake do in the circumstances? The answer flashed into his mind as clearly as if Eugene had spoken it in his ear; Give her up. So much for Eugene!

Challis had sometimes wondered how, when the certain hour of their meeting came, he would greet Rose. He knew that she relied on his friendship, in spite of her long silence and neglect, and he was determined not to fail her in any emergency.

He would not tell her the story of his search. After all, she was her own mistress, and he had no right, or desire, to reproach her.

Her independence had always been a source of delight to the conventional dentist. He could not imagine, in any circumstances, the flag of her pride trailing in the dust.

Musing thus, his eyes wandered over the still crowded room to the constantly opening and closing doors, where he could see the rain spluttering on the step.

He looked at the little boy, who had left off crying and was nestling against his mother; at two young men, heedless of the chatter and clatter of their surroundings, who were playing draughts; at his irritable neighbour, scowling over an evening paper; at a little group of the waitresses, whispering together beside the counter——

Rose!

He saw Rose Leonard. His faith was proved.

He had found her! He had found her at last, in the very hour of his despair.

He had found her in a common teashop, not a couple of miles from her old home.

Her face was half in shadow; her left hand rested on her hip, and she held a tea-tray in the other, balanced on the edge of the counter. She was listening to one of her fellow-waitresses, and he saw her smile and nod in answer. Then she took the pot of tea and jug of hot water, necessary to complete her load, and moved briskly away to the farther end of the shop.

Mr. Challis rose and followed her. He waited until she had emptied the tray and taken another order. Then he stretched out his hand and lightly touched her shoulder. She gave a little start and turned her questioning, dark eyes full on his face.

"Ah!" she said on an indrawn breath.

They stared at each other blankly for a second. Mr. Challis was the first to recover from the shock of their mutual surprise. He found his voice in a commonplace sentence.

"How are you, Rose? I hope you're well. Can't we have a little talk? It's a long time since we met."

She glanced at the clock on the wall, then looked at him again, leaning against one of the tables, as if she suddenly needed support.

"I shall have finished work at eight o'clock, Mr. Challis. Can you wait?"

"Surely! Surely!"

She smiled tremulously at the dear, familiar kindness of his tone, but did not speak another

word. One of the other girls, in passing, gave her a warning touch on the arm.

"Look sharp, dear! Number two's callin' you."

Rose Leonard mechanically turned to the table indicated, stooped forward to take the order, and hurried away to fill it. Challis sat down to wait.

He could not look at her again, for the lines of suffering in her face—how thin and pointed it had grown!—moved him to unaccountable pain. It was as if he had received a physical injury that must be concealed. He struggled with himself and overcame his weakness. When Rose joined him, a few minutes after the hour, he was ready to meet her with cheerful words and smiles.

They turned out into the dreary street. Pavements shone, and even the houses looked as if they were oozing water.

"Where are we going?" said Rose, bluntly.

"I hoped you would invite me to your home. How is mama?" answered Mr. Challis.

"Mother's very well, but we shall not find her in. She has an engagement to 'walk on' at one of the theatres. It gives her great pleasure, and, what is more to the point, she earns a guinea a week."

They had started to walk quickly down the street, Rose with her old umbrella close to her head, Mr. Challis keeping as close to her as he could on the crowded pavement. She suddenly stopped, at the corner of the road, looking up at him with a frowning face.

"Do you really want to come home with me, Mr. Challis? I don't live in a very pleasant neighbourhood."

"Yes, I want to go home with you. I want to talk to you," he answered, decidedly.

"Oh, well, you may find it amusing," she said, disagreeably, with an indifferent shrug of the shoulders.

"Can't we get in a motor or take a taxi?" he asked, for the rain was still pelting down.

"It's only a few minutes from here. I always walk," she replied, and started off again, leaving him to follow, or walk by her side, as he chose.

She threaded her way through several mean streets, stopping at the side door of a greengrocer's shop.

After fumbling in the pockets of her waterproof for a key, she admitted him to a narrow passage, with a ragged strip of cocoanut matting on the floor.

He was surrounded by darkness and a strong smell of fried onions, when she closed the street door, and groped his way after her to the second floor. Rose, producing a second key, unlocked the door of the front room.

"Come in!" she said, with no cordiality in the invitation.

Mr. Challis, awkwardly holding his wet umbrella and with the rain trickling from his hat, stood just inside the door while she struck a match and lighted a gas-jet beside the mantelpiece.

The uncurtained windows framed a blurred picture of dingy houses opposite, flecked with yellow lights. The room was small and sparsely furnished, with a table in the centre, on which were

the remains of a meal—bits of broken bread and meat, a bottle and glass, and a dog-eared book propped up against the pepper-pot—and there were two or three upholstered chairs.

Several of Mrs. Leonard's garments were lying on the floor, and a couple of pairs of old slippers were kicked under the table. There were a few flowers in a dropsical glass vase, a photograph of Nannie Mordaunt in a cheap frame, and several broken, dusty china ornaments on the mantelpiece. The walls were decorated with faded coloured pictures from old Christmas numbers of illustrated papers.

Rose's thin face flushed as she looked round the room, but she spoke with assumed indifference.

"Make yourself as much at home as you can, Mr. Challis, while I clear the table. My mother, you perceive, is not the tidiest woman in the world."

The visitor cheerfully disposed of the wet umbrellas by putting them to drain in a china bowl off the mantelpiece, hung his overcoat and hat outside the door, and then turned his attention to the fireplace.

"Can't we have a fire, my dear?" he said. "Just you give me a handful of sticks and some paper."

"It's a great expense," said Rose, half seriously, half jestingly.

"Blow the expense!" said Mr. Challis.

He turned up his big white cuffs with their big gold links—he would not have felt himself truly a professional man without such outward and visible

signs of prosperity—and quickly built a fire in the grimy, cheerless grate.

Then he went into the back room to wash his hands, while Rose arranged the sitting-room. Left to himself, Mr. Challis glanced at the untidy confusion of clothes on a row of hooks bulging through an old pair of curtains, the bed covered with a patched old coverlet, the rickety chest of drawers, the small window, with a broken pane, overlooking a stack of chimneys and a high brick wall, the pots of geraniums on the sill, all stalk and yellow leaf, with no hint of a blossom—this was the place where Rose and her mother slept.

When he re-entered the adjoining room, vigorously rubbing his hands chilled by cold water, he found the girl kneeling in front of the blazing fire. She looked over her shoulder with an expression of sheer delight.

"Isn't it nice and warm?" she said, "isn't it beautiful?"

No words she could have spoken would have touched him more deeply. He stood still at the door looking at her with a keen, kind, penetrating glance that noted every detail of her changed appearance: the carelessly coiled, limp, dark hair, the work-worn hands, the curve of the slender arms, the tired droop of the whole body in its old, neat dress—unspeakably feminine, and appealing; so cherishable, so perishable, eternal woman.

He drew a chair up to the fire, and held out his own hands to the flare and glow.

"Now, tell me all about it!" he said.

His tone struck her as peculiarly impersonal,

like the question of a doctor to a patient. She found it easy to answer, but any touch of tenderness or intimacy would have broken down her self-control.

"I think you can see for yourself what has happened, Mr. Challis," she answered, with an expressive glance round the room. "I have been working at the Tiger shop for nearly three weeks. At first I was in one of their city branches, but it is much more convenient at Tottenham Court Road. We have lived in this house since we left the lodgings near Colet Street."

"Couldn't you get any typing or shorthand work?"

"No! I tried and tried until I was sick of trying. I got a well-paid job at a wholesale stationer's, soon after we vanished, but the manager made it impossible for me to stop, although the girls there thought I was a fool to give it up."

"Was the manager unkind to you? Did he dislike you?"

"On the contrary, he liked me too much."

Her face was darkened for a few moments with an angry flush, and she stared at the fire again, frowning and biting her lips.

"What did you do next?" said Mr. Challis.

"Tramped the streets, looking for work," she answered, with a return to ill-assumed indifference. "It isn't a pleasant occupation, Mr. Challis. I was very glad to get a job at Tiger's. They're a common lot of girls—we get all sorts—but they're generally good-natured, and we don't have to do with any men. That's an advantage. Pay well?

Oh, yes! Tiger's is a very prosperous concern. The shareholders get big dividends. It must be very gratifying for them to know that we girls are receiving the handsome sum of ten shillings a week—find our own starched aprons and caps, and deduct one and sixpence for our dinners."

She laughed loudly, pushing back her hair from her face with both hands. Before Mr. Challis could speak she went on.

"Mother's earning a guinea a week. At least, the piece will be off on Saturday and she'll be out of work again. She rehearsed for three weeks without any salary, of course, and the play has run for a fortnight! But after all, if one gets enough to eat and drink, and a fire, what does it matter?"

"But why have you hidden away from all your friends?" protested her companion. "It was not right. Poor little Nannie Mordaunt has nearly broken her heart. My mother and I were most distressed, most anxious, I assure you——"

He stopped abruptly, unable to finish the stilted sentence. He rested his elbows on his knees, shading his face with his hands, so that she could not see his expression.

She took up the poker, stooped to look between the bars, broke a piece of coal, and laid it down again. She was obviously nervous and ill-at-ease. Then she sat back on her heels and laughed once more, an affected laugh, without mirth.

"Why have I hidden away from all my friends?" she repeated his question. "Because I'm adventurous, Mr. Challis. I was tired of the sameness

of life. Poor Nannie! dear Nannie! I wrote to her once. I love her. I wanted to be quite independent, and I knew you'd all get along very well without me. I did it for pure mischief, madness if you like——"

"That isn't true!" interrupted Mr. Challis.

She was startled and almost frightened by the change in his voice. He suddenly stooped forward and laid his hands on her shoulders, pulling her round to face him.

"You're not telling me the truth!" he said; "you're giving me childish reasons—they're ridiculous—and you know it."

For a minute there was silence. She felt the grip of his fingers through her thin dress. She swayed a little nearer to him. He did not move.

"Yes! I have not been telling you the truth," she said, her voice broken with little gasping breaths; "I tried to hide myself because I was ashamed—wretched—furious—broken! I was tired of my life, sick of it all. I thought it would be easy to get work and to find new friends. I didn't know! I didn't know! I couldn't bear your reproach and scorn——"

"My reproach and scorn?" he repeated, wonderingly.

"Yes! You knew I had been jilted by Eugene Milrake," she replied, the words rushing out, all reticence flung away; "you knew that I loved him. Can't you understand? I'm not like other girls—I'm not a saint, like Nannie Mordaunt—I'm passionate and inconsistent and wild. I couldn't live the old life any longer. My nerves were all

on edge. I'm all bitter and sore and wretched! I didn't care what became of me. God knows I didn't care! Where is Eugene? Where is Eugene? No! Don't tell me. I never want to see him again. He has spoilt my life."

She wrenched herself from the hands on her shoulders and crouched down upon the floor, crying violently, her dark hair torn about her face. He stooped forward, but he could only hear a few broken words, lost in sobs.

The rain still lashed the windows. The flickering gas-jet left the corners of the room in growing darkness. A bright flame leapt up in the fire, danced and played, and died away in a curl of smoke. The noises of the street grew less and less in approaching night.

Forgetful of the passing of time, forgetful of everything but her own misery, Rose sat upon the ground until she was weak and spent in the abandonment of her grief and rage.

Then, in silence, she slowly raised her eyes to look at her companion. They were blurred and dim with the rush of tears, and her lips quivered.

He bent over her. He did not speak, but in his face she saw, as if sudden light were shining upon it, such tender pity, such true and radiant goodness that she drew back trembling—awed—looking at him in speechless wonder.

He put out his hands, but she did not take them. The air seemed to grow still. Then she heard him speaking in a voice that was as strange to her as his expression, and she knew in an instant that

he loved her. He had loved her ever since she was a child.

Peace and rest and safety—they were hers! With a passionate movement—the last of her storm of passion—she fell towards him and he lifted her up in his arms, and gently pressed her head against his shoulder, and so held her, weeping, on his breast.

CHAPTER XIV

"**I** HAVE a story for you to-day, Miss Mordaunt, and a new name!" said Henry Rostron.

He had just entered the little room behind the shop in Colet Street, and laid the spring offering of a bunch of pink anemones on the work-table.

Nannie was putting the finishing touches to the tassels of a long necklet of seed pearls. He sat down in his accustomed chair. It was several weeks since she had seen him.

"I saw your brother last night, Nannie," Rostron went on. "My brother and his wife took a party to the Paramount. The Tee Family had a very good place on the programme. We had the pleasure of seeing Perth juggle, and disappear in a most mysterious manner, in an illusion."

"I think the Tee Family is simply marvellous!" exclaimed Nannie. "Do you remember meeting Mr. and Mrs. Tee at supper here?"

"Quite well."

"Would you have guessed that they were so distinguished?"

"I don't know whether I am a good judge of distinguished people, Nannie," said Rostron, with a smile.

"Oh, they're quite aristocratic, Perth says," continued Nannie. "They are related to nearly all the well-known people in the show world. Mr. Tee is very wealthy. Perth goes to their house. They've got a lovely garden, and horses, and any amount of plush-covered furniture. Mrs. Tee has a passion for plush and velvet. Do you like velvet dresses and massive jewellery? Mrs. Tee wears them all the year round."

"Perhaps velvet and massive jewellery remind one a little too much of Hamlet's mother, as she appears on the stage at her second wedding," said Rostron, "but no doubt it is very becoming to Mrs. Tee."

"No doubt, Mr. Rostron."

She looked at him and they both laughed. Then Nannie held out the seed pearl tassels at full length, shaking them gently into place.

"What is the story you have to tell me, Mr. Rostron, and what is the new name?"

"The story is a pearl legend that a friend sent to me in a letter."

He took an envelope, addressed in a woman's handwriting, from his pocket-book, drew out a half sheet of paper and read:

"At the point of the heart is a Lotus bud, and within the Lotus is a jewel.

"An angel had gazed at the sun for so long that the light was all reflected on its face. A time came when a fuller ray burst forth, and the one who had so exulted in the glory, thinking 'I have attained the light!' was so thrilled with ecstasy that a tear fell from its eyes. Just the weight of

one tear-drop released the spirit, and, rising still higher, it was fully illumined and passed right into glory, becoming one with the Sun.

"The tear fell through space into the opening bud of the Lotus, and in that fire of love, which at the centre is the same as the glory of the sun, it became a pearl with a veiled surface. As the flower opened the pearl rolled away and was washed on to the golden sands, to be picked up by a young girl, who held it in the palm of her hand, and the fire of its smouldering beauty touched the flower of her heart, and as tears like dewdrops filled her eyes its petals suddenly unfolded.

"At the point of the heart is a Lotus bud, and within the Lotus is a jewel."

"Are there other stories about pearls, Mr. Rostron?" asked Nannie.

"Many, and they have been given all sorts of pretty names," he answered. "Marbodius, a writer of nineteen hundred years ago, called them 'the shining globules of the Ethereal Seed.' Sir John Maundeville says, 'they are round in shape, as the diamond is square, by the virtue of God.' Sir Walter Scott describes them as 'the tears by Naiads wept.' To Pope they were 'lucid globes.'"

Shakespeare makes Ariel tell Ferdinand that his beloved father's eyes are changed into pearls. One of the Two Gentlemen of Verona says that 'black men are pearls in beauteous ladies' eyes.' Queen Titania's own fairy hangs a pearl in every cowslip's ear. Desdemona is Othello's pearl. Clarence, in his terrible dream, saw 'wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl.' In brief,

pearls are dropped through all the pages of all the plays."

"How can you remember this, Mr. Rostron?"

"I've been studying the subject, for your sake, Nannie," he replied. "Do you know the most wonderful pearl in the world is the Southern Cross, fished out of Australian waters, but it is far from the most beautiful. The Great Mogul possessed a pearl weighing one hundred and twenty-seven grains—think of it, my little stringer!—and the famous Hope pearl has been actually valued at twelve thousand pounds."

Rostron laughed at Nannie's wide eyes of wonder.

"I'm talking like an auctioneer's catalogue!" he exclaimed. "But the fact is, Nannie, having once begun to look for pearls, my mind is full of them. There never were jewels more renowned. No wonder Robert Hichens speaks of 'the pure rapture of the pearl,' and Browning saw 'in the core of one pearl all the shade and the shine of the sea.'"

"Do any of the poets talk of coloured pearls?" asked Nannie.

"The ancient writers ignored their dark, mysterious beauty," he replied. "They say it was the Empress Eugenie who made them popular, but Robert Herrick, in the sixteenth century, praised 'orient pearls of jet.' There are Scotch pearls, you know, and Irish and Welsh. You remember the 'pearl of great price' in the Scriptures? They decked the armour of gallant knights in the Middle Ages. They were used medicinally in the East, to

cure lunacy! Gentle Spenser sang of the pearls of Conway in his 'Faerie Queen.' Go where we will, in the old world or the new, we are bound to find them, and every single pearl is unique."

"What is the new name you mentioned when you came in, Mr. Rostron?"

"It resembles your old one, dear child—Anie."

"What does it mean?"

"A pearl again! It is an Indian word for perfect sphericity and lustre. In future I'll call you 'Anie,' but if you're not good it shall be changed to 'Kural,' which means very small and misshapen, or 'Thool,' and that's only a seed pearl."

"I must be very careful," said Nannie. "Isn't there a name I can give you, Mr. Rostron?"

He pondered for a minute.

"You might call me 'Kalippo.'"

"Is that the name for a big orient?" she asked, slyly.

"No, my child. It means a poor specimen that fails alike in shape and colour. Yes, call me Kalippo, as you're too shy to say Harry, or Hal."

Nannie Mordaunt rested her cheek on her hand and looked at him thoughtfully, leaning an elbow on the table. She wondered by what name his wife had known him. Did he ever think of his wife?

Her innocent fancy had woven a romance into the unknown story of his youth. It gave her a subtle joy, perilously near to pain, to think of the full life he had lived before she knew him, so different from her own.

"Do you know what I would do, Mr. Rostron, if I could look into the past?" she asked, suddenly.

"Tell me, Anie, though I'm no longer 'Mr. Rostron,' you know."

"Well—Kalippo! I would see all the wonderful places where you have lived. I would see you at work and play. I would like to see all the people you have ever known."

He threw back his head and laughed gaily.

"My dear girl, what a quaint idea! Do you know, I'm nearly old enough to be your father? I had travelled round the world, and forgotten my boyhood, while you were still in the cradle. Now, I wonder, Anie, if it were possible for you to see the whole of my life, what you would think of it all? What do I think of it myself, now that it is nearly over?"

"I can't bear to hear you say that!"

Her appealing voice, the hand she instinctively laid on his, made him smile at her reassuringly, with an instant change of manner.

"I'm very much alive, my dear little Anie, so you needn't look so serious. I'm going to live for a thousand years, and so are you, just as we are living now."

"What do you mean, Kalippo?" asked the girl, boldly speaking his new name.

"A dream life, Anie. Our astral bodies will return to an astral Colet Street, where you will string pearls, and I will sit still, doing nothing: both of us characteristically employed."

"What shall we say—new talk or old talk?"

"Both! I will tell you about all the worlds I

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have explored, and you shall tell me about the
year."

"Then I suppose that means I shall not be clever enough to explore worlds on my own account?"

"You'd lose your little way in them, Anie. Never mind! You shall find out secrets."

"Tell me some of the secrets."

"Oh, why the snowdrops always look on the ground, and why lilies-of-the-valley ever grow old and turn into red balls, and why the robin really has a red breast—there are so many tales about it one doesn't know which to believe—and why the rainbow always ends in the next field, and why the Snark is so very frequently a Boojum."

"Are you talking nonsense, Kalippo?" asked the pearl stringer.

"I really think I must be, now you come to mention it," said Rostron.

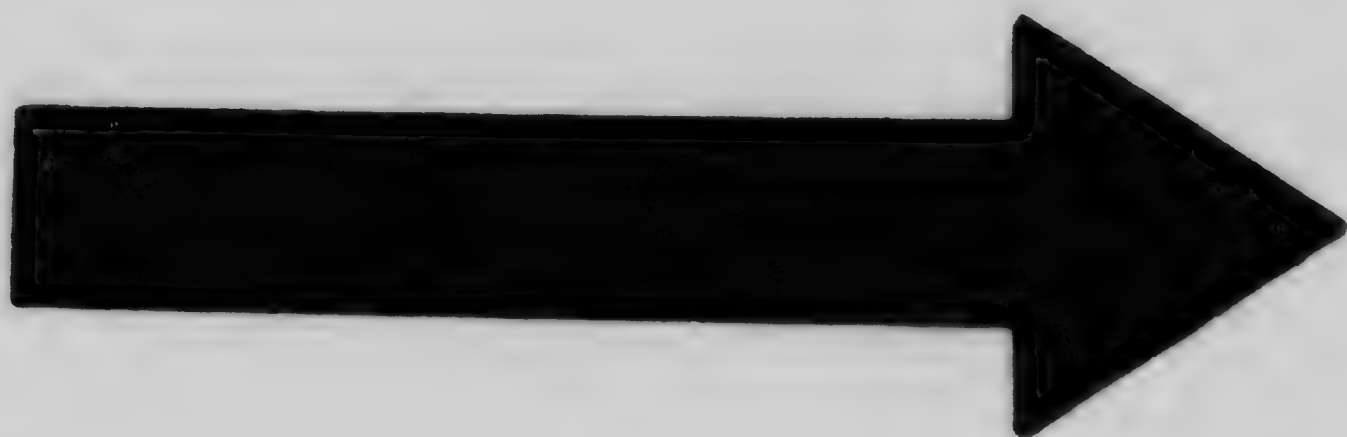
Later in the afternoon, when he had gone away, Nannie had a visit from her friend Rose.

It was four months since Rose had served in a teashop. She had not quite forgotten it, as Mrs. Leonard had succeeded in doing, but she never alluded to the fact.

Entering the house with much of her old, aggressive manner, as if the door had no right to be in her way, she greeted Nannie with an enveloping embrace.

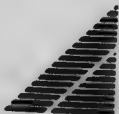
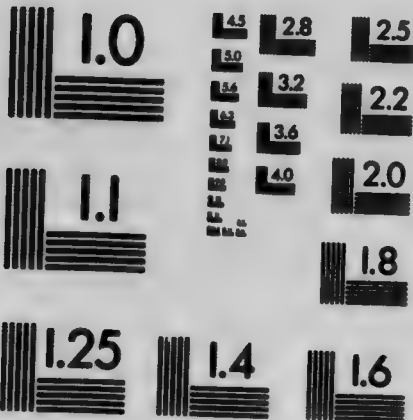
There was an indefinable air of grace about Rose in these days, a little languid, but none the less attractive for that—a freshness, a newness, in keeping with the spring o' the year.

She was dressed in thin white serge, with lines of



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fur at the throat and wrists, and a white felt hat, daintily tilted to one side, with a scarlet quill.

Her cheeks were flushed with rapid walking in the wind. Her white teeth glistened and gleamed between her smiling lips. Her bright eyes quickly found what they sought—the mirror.

"Well, Nannie, how do I look in my new suit?" she asked, pulling down the dainty little coat and blowing a few specks of dust off her cuffs.

"Oh, how pretty!" exclaimed the pearl stringer, admiringly, rising from her chair to see her friend better; then she laughed and added, "The whole effect is very 'bridey,' Rose."

"Then it's appropriate," replied Rose. "I don't mind being taken for a bride. It's only affectation when girls pretend to hide it. It's great fun to be a bride."

"Is it?" asked Nannie.

"Why shouldn't people know when one is newly married?" said Rose. "If all the world loves a lover, I'm sure all the world admires a bride."

"Did you find that the case in Paris?" asked Nannie, laughing.

"Yes! I'm glad we went to Paris. It's so lively and everybody's gay. There again! Most girls pretend that they want a quiet, sentimental honeymoon. It's all nonsense. As if two people, who have agreed to spend their lives together, want to be bored to death with each other's society at the very start."

"Does Mr. Challis agree with your views?" said Nannie.

Rose laughed again.

"He agrees with all my views. But don't call him 'Mr. Challis,' Nannie. Somehow—it's a painful fact—I always connect my new name with dentistry. When I was quite a child, you see, I associated the word Challis with toothache. My mother looked on toothache as original sin. If I dared to complain I was instantly threatened with Mr. Challis, as if he were a bogey. But what were we talking about? Oh, Paris! I liked it immensely, Nan. I wish we could have stopped there for months."

"What did you do with yourselves all the time?"

"Went to the theatre nearly every evening, took drives, saw the sights, dined at the most captivating cafés, and just enjoyed ourselves!" answered the bride.

"But you were not sorry to get home to your very own house, were you?" asked Nannie, who had all the unmarried girl's longing for a very own house of her own.

Rose puckered her lips and minutely examined her new shoes, stretching out her pretty feet with a great display of brown silk stockings.

"It isn't quite the same as if we had a new house," she answered, slowly. "You see Mrs. Challis, or mama as she likes me to call her, had everything in apple-pie order. That is one of Sydney's favourite expressions. I wonder who invented it? I'm not orderly myself, and I always detested apple-pie."

"Of course, Mrs. Challis will continue to live with you?" said Nannie.

"Of course," repeated Rose.

She gave up the examination of her shoes and folded her arms on the table in the old familiar attitude, as brooding and melancholy for the minute as if she were still an underpaid, discontented, unhappy girl. Her eyes wandered from the scattered tools, on the green cloth, to the cheerless window, to the bookcase, to the starry anemones, in water on the sill, and so back again to the strings of pearls, and the glitter of her own dearly loved diamond sparkling over her wedding ring.

"Sydney wanted to give me pearls," she said, turning and twisting her hand under the gas-jet, "but they represent tears, don't they? I'm not at all superstitious, but I always throw a pinch of salt over my left shoulder whenever it's spilt, and I think it would be very foolish to wear an opal or a pearl in one's engagement ring. Besides, a diamond is so much more valuable."

She rose from her chair and began to put on her gloves.

"Are you going so soon, darling?" asked Nannie, in a tone of disappointment. "I thought you would stop the evening."

"I'm sorry, Nan, but it's impossible. I was not home to dinner last night, or the night before, and they seemed to miss me. At least, Sydney misses me, and my mama-in-law thinks I am neglecting my duties."

"But you don't dine till half-past seven. You needn't hurry away," pleaded Nannie.

"I want to have a walk, dear, all by myself. I'm getting so abominably lazy!"

She embraced Nannie again, charged her with affectionate messages to Mr. and Mrs. Mordaunt and the silent aunt, and went away, turning many times to kiss her hand to her friend at the door.

Colet Street looked very narrow, crowded, and poor. She glanced about her with mingled amusement and disgust.

"How could I ever have endured the place?" she thought.

The question suggested other places—the tea-shop in Tottenham Court Road, the wretched lodgings where Mr. Challis had found her; but she banished them from her mind.

She did not turn into Hyde Park, although it used to be her favourite walk, but kept to the streets.

There is hardly a finer walk in London, on a spring night, than the westward stretch of the wide road from Marble Arch to Bayswater. It is all down hill, with the indefinite boundary of leafy trees on one's left hand and well-built houses, with good space in front of them, on the right, while the sky is narrowed between the distant roofs into a strip of ever changing beauty—now smouldering with the last rays of the sunset, now reflecting the red glow of the myriad lamps of endless streets, now as sombre as a lake at night, and now uplifting its cloudy mountains, drifting like snow across the moon.

Rose walked briskly, her head held high, so that the wind blew in her face and played with her hair.

She was exhilarated, well, and strong; the

languor of her manner had passed away ; she found intense delight in the fresh, tingling air, the pictures of the busy road, the delicious beauty of children who passed her by, the consciousness of her own good health, the swing of her walk, the glowing warmth in fingers and toes, the absence of all fatigue or desire to rest.

It was seven o'clock when she reached the house in Bayswater that was now her home.

Crocuses, shining like little coloured lamps, were planted in circles in the neat front garden, and all the brass plates, "Surgery," "Visitors," "Servants," "Knock and Ring," and so on, were as shiny as of yore.

Rose gave a rattling knock. The door was opened by the girl named Olly 'Ooper, who had grown into a tall, handsome young woman. She greeted young Mrs. Challis with a beaming smile. They liked each other very much. Olly had highly approved of the marriage, although she considered the dentist rather an old man for Miss Leonard, any one over twenty-five being middle-aged in her eyes.

"Are there any patients in the surgery, Olly?" Rose asked, glancing at the silver salver on the hall table, where there were no new cards to interest her.

"No, ma'am. Mrs. Challis is upstairs ; she was out for a bit, but found it blustery. There's been a lot of patients all the afternoon, but nobody's called," answered Olly.

"I'm not surprised at that," observed Rose, half to herself, as she turned towards the surgery.

"No, ma'am, nobody never does call; at least, I can't say that for myself, although I've told him again and again.—I wish I had as many guineas as times I've told him—it's no good him coming without his tools, for I've not got time for that sort of nonsense; it isn't to be expected where there's only two kept."

"What are you talking about?" asked her mistress, in a puzzled voice.

"Young Simpson, the young man in the joinery way, he's been here again; but please don't mention it to Mrs. Challis," replied Olly.

"Oh, your latest friend," said Rose, with a smile. "Are you going to accept him, Olly? Is it serious?"

Miss Hooper gave an indignant little sniff with her pretty little nose.

"Indeed, I 'ope I've got better taste than that, ma'am; but there's no harm in his coming to see me *if* he brings his tools. There's a lot of little jobs he can do about the house."

"I'm sure Mr. Challis will not allow your friend to work here for nothing, Olly," said her mistress. "The young man doesn't come to do our repairs, you know, but to see you."

"That's all right, ma'am," rejoined Olly complacently. "There's no need to mention it to Mr. Challis at all. It would be a wicked waste of money to call in another man when we can have young Simpson for nothing."

Rose shook her head and laughed. She never approved of Olly's methods with her admirers.

The surgery was empty. Rose had taken off

her hat and coat in the hall, and now laid them hastily down on the table, and went to look for her husband in the workshop.

The trim back garden, like the front, was gleaming with crocuses and the promise of daffodils. The big lilac bush, hiding the workshop door, was shooting green in every bough and twig.

As she paused for a moment to look at it, her hand on the door, a sudden recollection of the spring of last year rushed over her, but spring at a later date, when purple blossoms waved in the breeze.

She had stood on this same spot with Eugene Milrake. He had gently pulled down a laden bough for them both to enjoy the fragrance, cheek pressed to cheek, and she could almost feel again the soft touch of the petals, and inhale their sweet, sweet scent.

Then, with a start and expression passing over her face of anger, or pain, or self-reproach, too quickly gone to be named, she opened the workshop door and went in.

Mr. Challis and Thomas, his assistant, were hard work. There was a strong smell from the vulcaniser. Mr. Challis was sitting at the bench, finishing one set of teeth, while Thomas was pedalling away at the lathe, polishing another.

Both men turned at the sound of the door. Thomas made an awkward bow, and officiously pushed forward a stool. The dentist nodded. Rose, with a smile in passing for Thomas, bent over Mr. Challis's shoulders, her hands lightly laid upon them.

"Well, I've come home in good time to-night," she said. "What are you doing?"

"I'm finishing Mrs. Dooley's case," he replied. "Won't you sit down, my dear? I shall be ready to knock off in about ten minutes."

Rose perched herself on the stool, swinging her crossed feet, and watched him. His interest in his work always surprised her. It was true that no two patients were alike, but there was a terrible sameness and monotony, it seemed to Rose, in the mechanical part of the business.

How ugly Mrs. Dooley must be, she reflected, to have such an ugly shaped jaw; there was something repugnant to her in the thought of Mr. Challis touching and handling the mouths and teeth of all sorts and conditions of people, in good health and bad. It was an unpleasant idea that frequently occurred to her mind.

It was in such quiet minutes as this, while she looked at her husband working, that Rose found it hard to realise the fact of her marriage. It was so strange, unutterably strange, that her storied life should suddenly have drifted into ease and security.

It was all over, she told herself: the excitement, the possibilities, the daily uncertainty of her girlhood.

The misery and poverty were over, but the dreams were over, too.

She recalled her own thoughts and actions as Rose Leonard with mingled pity and amazement. How inexperienced, foolish, sentimental she had been!

How easy it was, after all, to shift the burden

of care and responsibility from her own shoulders to the strong shoulders of a dear fellow who loved her. He was so well pleased with the bargain, too! That amused her a little, for it meant the support of Mrs. Leonard added to the expense of a pretty wife.

Rose was insensible, at this time, of the undercurrent of meanness in such reflections. She did not see that they belittled her own worth and misjudged the quality of a man's love.

She was accustoming herself to look upon marriage as a business arrangement, with the honest intention of fulfilling her own share, but an even stronger resolution to make her partner fulfil his.

If she had thought Mr. Challis a sensitive man, at all exacting in temper or temperament, she might have foreseen that the excitement and possibilities of her life were just beginning, not ended for ever; but she flattered herself, after two months' marriage, there was nothing left to discover in the character or disposition of her old friend and new husband.

"There you are, Mrs. Dooley!" exclaimed Mr. Challis, holding that lady's finished set of false teeth on the palm of his hand, and looking at it proudly, "I flatter myself these jolly old pegs will last *your* time, my lady!"

He rose from his seat, and stretched himself. He was in his shirt sleeves, with his big, hairy arms bare to the elbow. Rose laid her hand on one of them, above the wrist, and squeezed it as hard as she could.

"I can't hurt you, can I?" she said, laughing.

"Not easily," he answered, turning down his cuffs. "Just you finish your job, Thomas, and then off you go. Good night, my lad!"

As they went through the garden Mr. Challis put his arm round Rose's shoulders, and, stooping down, pressed her cheek with a long, gentle kiss.

"Happy, my dear?" he asked, holding her still for a minute.

"Very happy!" she rejoined, lightly clasping two big fingers of the hand hanging over her shoulder, "but I feel rather tired. Let us go out this evening."

"Is that a good way to cure your tiredness?" he asked. "Besides, Booker is coming with a new pamphlet, and old Mr. Polgram is sure to look in for a game with old Mr. Davey."

Booker was Mr. Challis's friend, the Bacon-Shakespeare student, while Mr. Polgram and Mr. Davey were the ancient chess players.

"Very well!" said Rose, with a slight sigh, "of course we'll stop at home."

They met old Mrs. Challis at the garden door, holding her daughter-in-law's white coat and felt hat in her hand.

"Oh, I forgot!" exclaimed Rose, relieving her of the burden.

"On the table in the surgery!" said Mrs. Challis, cheerfully, but reproachfully; "I hardly think that is a suitable place for your out-door things, Rose."

"I'm sorry, but nobody goes into the surgery

after seven o'clock, mama. How did you make the discovery ? "

"Olly told me she let you in at about five minutes to seven, my dear," said Mrs. Challis, her cheerfulness unaffected by her daughter-in-law's evident annoyance.

"Olly is like a private detective!" exclaimed Rose; but the emphasis on the name showed that the remark was meant to apply to Olly's old mistress.

Rose went upstairs without another word, but, when she reached the second flight, stood still to look over the banisters. Mrs. Challis was disappearing into the dining-room, and her son was still in the hall, absently turning over the cards on the salver.

"Sydney!"

The word snapped out like a shot. He turned and ran up the stairs, following Rose into her room.

"I want to have a latch-key!" she said, throwing her hat and coat with a violent gesture on the bed. "It's perfectly absurd that I should have to knock or ring at my own door every time I come home. I won't have Olly set to spy upon me! We're not living in ancient Victorian days. It doesn't follow that because your mother never had a latch-key, that I shouldn't have one. I'll have it cut to-morrow."

"My dear, what an unnecessary fuss!" interrupted her husband, taking a bunch of keys out of his pocket and calmly detaching one. "There you are! Don't you bother to have another cut, I'll see to it."

He laid the key on the dressing-table, smiling at

her. She saw that her rage and indignation had been not only premature, but ridiculous. She could not resist a taunt.

"I suppose you'll be afraid to tell your mother?"

He laughed outright. His answer gave her an indefinable little shock of surprise.

"I'm not the strong, silent man in a novel, Rose, afraid of my mother or my wife, or willing to be a shuttlecock between them. Of course I'll tell the dear old soul about the latch-key, if you wish and I'm sure she won't mind. My dear, such a trifle!"

When he was at the door she sprang after him.

"I'm sorry I was so angry, Sydney, but your mother aggravates me until I could shriek!"

Her husband looked down into her flushed face with genuine surprise on his own.

"How odd that sounds! She's got her funny little ways, I know, but she is a most kind-hearted, generous woman"—he paused for a final word, adding with the touch of pomposity that was rarely addressed to Rose—"an estimable parent, I assure you, my dear."

"Oh, yes!" she agreed, touched by his surprise at her words, "I know she has many good qualities. She has been very kind to me and to my mother. I must learn to adapt myself."

"That doesn't follow in the least," said Mr. Challis. "If we cannot live happily together, if we find it doesn't answer, it will be perfectly easy to give my mother her own little home. I'm sure you would like her to be quite near us, but a house wall in between, my dear—oh, the domestic misery

that might be averted by a house wall between a man's wife and his relations! I should even recommend it, in many cases, between a man himself and his wife."

Rose echoed his good-natured laugh, but later in the evening, when she was alone, the matter he had dismissed so lightly returned to her mind in the form of an exaggerated grievance.

Standing at her bedroom window, idly watching the occasional passers-by, she recalled the quiet, aggressively cheerful manner of old Mrs. Challis, with her perpetual woolwork in her busy fingers.

She was sitting in the room below at that minute, intently listening to Mr. Booker droning over the new Bacon-Shakespeare pamphlet, while her son, who talked so airily of finding her a little home of her own, gave way to her opinion on every subject.

Rose, insufferably bored by the sound of the pamphlet and the sight of the chess-players, had slipped away unnoticed.

She remembered that Nannie Mordaunt was to go to the theatre with Mr. Rostron. They would be there now, enjoying themselves. She longed to go to the same theatre; but only for a few minutes, then the desire passed to give place to another.

She wished they were still in Paris. Why had she found Paris so delightful? Partly because she had had no time to think of anything but the day's events; partly, because she had been in such happy accord with her companion. She drummed the tassel of the window-blind against the pane.

What had become of Eugene Milrake? There was no harm in thinking of Eugene, although such a thought, under the lilac bush in the afternoon, had troubled her peace for a minute.

Their young love, to look back upon, was exaggerated, sentimental, delirious. She could not understand Eugene's share in it; less, her own.

A sense of loneliness crept over her. She turned from the window to glance round the darkling room. What a pretty room! The new furniture had been one of Challis's gifts, bought as a surprise on her first home-coming.

Her longing for dainty possessions—little jewels, flowers, pretty clothes—had lessened in the gratification. These things were already necessities, not luxuries. That the desire for them had influenced her in marrying was a recollection that put her to the blush.

She had tried to persuade herself, before the engagement was a week old, that affection, gratitude, and esteem alone bound her to Sydney Challis. She had made him believe it. She was glad he had never questioned her about Eugene, or betrayed any curiosity, but at the same time, with the inconsistency of an egoist, his indifference wounded her vanity. She deserved such confidence, but blamed the man who gave it to her.

A tap at the door interrupted her vague, contradictory meditations, and her husband entered the room.

"Why did you run away, my dear?" he asked, going to the window where she stood.

"I didn't think you wanted me," answered Rose

beginning to drum again on the glass with the blind tassel. "I'm sure Mr. Booker, and Mr. Polgram, and Mr. Davey, and mama are quite happy without my company."

"I wanted you myself, Rose."

His soft voice, so unlike the voice that she heard in the surgery and the workshop, appealed to her heart. There was a vibrating quality in its low tone that moved her with sudden emotion. She leaned against him with a feeling of rest and quiet happiness.

"Oh, Sydney, I'm so fond of you!" she said.

There was something so childish and loving in the words, and the caress which accompanied them, that Challis laughed, looked at her curiously for a minute, and then moved away to the door.

"Come along down, dear heart!" he said. "You mustn't stop here, moping."

"I never mope!" cried Rose, indignantly.

Then she took the hand he held out, and they went downstairs together.

CHAPTER XV

WATCH the flowing tide of any river, as it follows its long road to the everlasting sea; watch how softly it ripples and widens, curls and narrows in its course; glittering in sunshine, asleep under the stars, it seems to lie still—still as a lake—but the undercurrent is sweeping on, as surely as the Spring blossoms into Summer and the fire of Autumn is killed by Winter snows.

Leave the city behind, where the river is spanned by endless bridges and flecked with quivering lights, and follow its winding ribbon between country meadows. There are little streams eddying into the sedges; pools, starred with forget-me-nots; rapids, bubbling and breaking into liquid laughter, swirl about mossy stones, as little waterfalls splash and play in the midst of ferns and wild raspberries; hollows, dark and sombre, lie in the shadows of the banks; little tributaries scamper out of secret places to slip into the river that flows on and on, unceasingly.

So, with the river of Life. At times we are borne, consciously, on its full tide; at times we seem to drift into the shallows and the quiet nooks; we forget the blaze of the sun in the grateful

shadow of leafy trees, as we forget the rough winds in the warm breeze, scented with flowers; we forget our old, strenuous days, in peaceful, simple joys: we grow dreamy, in our full content, as if we had plucked the lotus plant; we think the soft summer will last for evermore.

Then, suddenly, we hear the wild music of the air. The boughs are stripped over our heads; the earth is brown and cold; we are swept into the river once more, like dead leaves.

Rose Challis—child of wind and storm, of love and passion—had long been resting in the shelter of the long, waving grasses under the summer trees. To carry the simile to a brief conclusion, she was never unconscious of the swirl of the tide. It is true she sat on the bank, her hand placidly locked in the hand of Sydney Challis, but her longing eyes were always on the lights and shadows of mysterious lands where the river wound its way; she heard the calling of the wild wind; she waited for the summons that would carry her away from dull Content.

To Nannie Mordaunt, on the contrary, her friend's life seemed full of wonder, excitement, depths, and heights.

Old Mrs. Challis, within six months of her son's marriage, had left her home of so many years, not without alarms and excursions, but far more happily, all things considered, than her daughter-in-law had dared to hope.

How Mr. Challis managed it, his unfailing good temper, his adroit little ways with his mother, his successful appeal to the generosity of his wife,

filled Nannie Mordaunt with as much admiration as surprise.

Nannie was the confidential adviser of them all.

Old Mrs. Challis took up her abode in Chiswick, as mistress of part of a small house. The famous set of furniture, upholstered in woolwork, went to the furnishing of her little drawing-room. Her landlady was a woman admirably suited to the old lady, who had been driven to despair by Rose's carelessness and indifference to order.

This landlady spent her life in cleaning, polishing, and dusting. Even the bushes in the front garden were regularly sponged with warm water, to which had been added a few drops of liquid ammonia, to make their leaves shine, and she had even been known to clean the doorsteps at nine o'clock at night, in case the boots of the last postman had left their marks to disgrace the dawn.

Rose rejoiced in the departure of her mother-in-law. Her own mother, re-established in Colet Street, accepted a small weekly cheque from Mr. Challis quite as a matter of course. She was happier without Rose, making her own friends and living her own life, on the ragged fringe of the theatrical world, with as much enthusiasm as if she had been a stage-struck girl of twenty.

Mr. Challis's practice steadily increased. Many wives would have remonstrated with him on the long hours that he worked and the gradual curtailment of his few holidays, but it never occurred to Rose to interfere. It was not selfishness on her part, but a peculiar indifference to the interests and possibilities of her husband's life. She was always

ready to add to his comfort or convenience, making a point of punctuality and good cookery, for instance, but her own light words spoken in jest to Nannie Mordaunt—"Mr. Challis and dentistry to me are synonymous terms"—had become a habit of mind.

Her affection grew, rather than diminished, as the quiet days slipped on, but it weighed as thistle-down in comparison with the new love that had come into her life, the love for her only child.

Sydney Challis Junior was born in the second year of their marriage. To Rose he was a source of exquisite delight in his infancy, for she was one of those women to whom very young babies appeal far more strongly than older children, an elementary trait in her essentially modern temperament, and she worshipped him with the pride of possession.

"Mine" was ever the strongest word in Rose's language. She secretly resented the equal claims of a father, although she would not have confessed such an absurd idea, and Nature, as if to give her a silent reproof, had fashioned her boy to closely resemble her husband, with hardly a touch of likeness to herself.

He was a big-headed, solemn baby, genial to his friends, uncompromisingly severe to strangers, so thoughtful, not to say wise, in expression that his father called him Solomon. Rose approved, but shortened it to Solly; Nannie Mordaunt, seeing him blinking in the sun, gave it another twist to Old Sol; Olly 'Ooper dropped the word "Babs" for Sols, and Henry Rostron, who paid an

occasional visit to the dentist's house, called him Sollo.

His real name was lost. He was Solomon, or one of its many abbreviations, to the end of the chapter.

There was a change in Rose, after the birth of the child. She lost her girlish vivacity. Her beauty developed, but it no longer gave her personal pleasure.

The undercurrent of her thoughts was expressed in one word—finality. She was possessed with the idea of having accomplished all that Nature demanded. She had passed on the torch. She had borne a son.

She never talked in this way to her husband, but he seemed to understand, to her wondering surprise, the change that had come over her. He showed it in trifles, tacitly accepting the situation, as if he had foreseen her secret feeling of finality.

There was no immediate change in their relations to each other, no quarrel, no outward difference in the habits and conduct of daily life.

Sensitive, delicate, reticent, the wife of one whom she had never loved, Rose Challis was slowly awakening to a full realisation of what it would have meant—this bond, this tie, this marriage—if he had been a different man. The knowledge prepared her, not for his strange comprehension of the subtle changes in her mind, but for his acquiescence in her unspoken desires.

Her gratitude for his chivalry and forbearance was the strongest feeling, except the mother-love, that had ever possessed her heart. It never

wholly left her, but it did not affect her judgment of the man in other matters. She had always considered him commonplace, and cared little to hear his opinions. Keeping this view of him strictly to herself both satisfied her own loyalty and flattered her sense of superiority.

Master Solomon, Sols, or old Sol, displayed great force of character at an early age. He was not at all the type of child to absorb his mother's attention. He was very fond of her, but he loved his father to a point of worship.

As a baby he would nearly leap out of Olly 'Ooper's arms when Mr. Challis appeared, clutch at the dentist's hair and beard, and throw himself ecstatically over his shoulder to drum with little clenched fists on his broad back.

Once beyond the age of infancy, Solomon had no taste for petting or caresses. He squirmed out of the embrace of ladies who were captivated by his big, solemn eyes, and only consented to sit on his mother's knee when bedtime drew near and he was very tired.

He talked at an early age, but it was a peculiar language of his own, omitting the consonant at the beginning of every word, difficult for the unlearned to understand. For example—" 'Olomon 'ants 'is 'inner!" was a demand for the midday meal, "Solomon wants his dinner;" and " 'Olomon 'rinks 'eal 'ea!" interpreted meant, "Solomon drinks real tea."

Olly and his mother generally caught at his meaning, but Mr. Challis's denseness reduced him to despair.

"Old 'ol 'ill 'ot 'alk to 'addy," meaning "Old Sol will not talk to daddy," was his ultimatum, and for quite a long time he communicated by signs with his humiliated father.

Bumble, the dog, was the little boy's favourite playmate. Strange are the affections and tastes of a dog. Bumble seemed to enjoy being pulled about by the legs or tail, put to bed in his kennel at ten o'clock in the morning, taught to swim in a pail, and playing ball until there was not the strength of a bark in his wiry body. When Solomon went into the house, for meals, Bumble sat by the closed door, crying and whining for him to go out again.

The cat and the child were on different terms. There was tolerance on her part; friendliness, but no familiarity, on his. Perhaps he thought her more sympathetic than Bumble, for Rose found him one day, in a corner of the garden, seriously showing Puss a bad scratch on his leg and asking her what she thought of it.

Old Sol was a squarely built child, with thick, bright hair, blunt features, and a smile of rare sweetness. He was quick-tempered, but never sullen; self-willed, but as amenable to reason as the student of human nature would expect at the age of three; kind to animals; practical, but not without imagination.

He could knock in a nail, or take out a screw, far better than his mother or Olly 'Ooper, and the latter taught him to help make a bed, or dust a room, in her own words, "beyond his years."

To see him extracting imaginary teeth from his

Teddy bear, with the sugar tongs, filled Mr. Challis with professional pride. He was a great favourite with Thomas and his fellow assistant, spent much of his time in the workshop, and studied their mechanical work with great interest.

At times his knowledge of dentistry was a little embarrassing, for visitors did not care to have audible remarks made upon the colour of their teeth, or to be asked suddenly to open their mouths to satisfy a small, serious boy's curiosity.

By his fourth birthday, however, he had learned to keep his observations to himself, to speak intelligibly, and to read and write one syllable words.

Solomon's devotion to his father grew with his years. It amused Rose to see them together, so closely resembling each other, the big man and the tiny boy. She frequently stood in the shadow of a curtain, at one or another of the windows at the back of the house, watching them in the garden, working side by side, Solomon copying every gesture of his companion.

If Mr. Challis paused to light his pipe, Solomon paused to put a long blade of grass between his lips; if Mr. Challis whistled a tune, the child puckered his mouth and pretended to whistle too. Once she heard him say, mopping his little face—"It's warm work for you and me, ain't it, matey?"

Rose knew, had she joined them, how fond a welcome she would see in her husband's eyes, while the child would have had a dozen things to tell her, all about the progress of the garden. But she rarely joined them. She had grown into the habit

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of sitting alone, reading alone, walking alone. Solitude appealed to her as never before. It seemed to be necessary to the unfolding and developing of her character, as necessary as mountain air to the hillman, or the sight of the sea to an islander.

Challis had long been able to satisfy all the wishes she cared to express. She had money, leisure, and many friends, spent as much of her time as she chose away from home and never troubled her head over ways and means.

Too sensible to be wantonly extravagant, it was not in Rose's character to pull her purse-strings tightly together, for she knew her husband's income—she never asked him questions, but he told her everything—and took him at his word in spending freely.

She was happy ; at all events, contented. Life went on in the quiet home in Bayswater as if the great word, Change, had passed out of the world.

CHAPTER XVI

ROSE Challis, Solomon, the pearl stringer, and Henry Rostron were at Kew Gardens. It was a long planned expedition to see the blue-bells. Mr. Challis was to have accompanied them, but had been prevented at the last minute from leaving home.

Nannie and Solomon kept up the conversation. Rostron was in a silent mood, and Rose was too lazy to talk. Trailing her parasol behind her on the grass she sauntered slowly along, looking at the flowers, occasionally smiling at the child, but as indifferent to other people as if she had been alone in the Gardens.

She liked Rostron, but never felt entirely at her ease with him. That Nannie, the shyest and most sensitive of girls, should dare to talk and laugh with him as she did was a continual surprise to her friend.

The sympathy that existed between the pearl stringer and Rostron, the affectionate intimacy, always puzzled her. She could not conceive how the differences in their class, education and surroundings had been bridged. Love would have offered an easy explanation, but she knew that Rostron did not love Nannie.

"Sydney must come to see the blue-bells before

they are over," said the pearl stringer, who had been greatly disappointed at his non-appearance.

"I think he likes his own garden better than Kew," said Rostron, with a smile.

"I wis' we could show 'em to Bumble," observed Solomon, staring through the lower rails of the fence at the blue sheet of flowers.

"I'm afraid that dogs don't care about blue-bells, Solly," answered his mother.

"Bumble does!" asserted Solomon. "I asked him and he said 'Yes!'"

"Bumble can't talk, Old Sol," said Nannie.

"No, Bumble can't talk," the little boy admitted, "but I said to him, 'If you want to go wiv' us, wag your tail!' and Bumble wagged his tail."

Rose laughed. She stooped down and brushed the wet hair from the child's little hot forehead with her handkerchief. They were both splashed and flecked with sunshine through the boughs, and Rostron, quick to discover beauty, exchanged a glance of admiration with Nannie, who saw and appreciated the momentary picture.

Rose was dressed in a new Spring dress of apple-green, fitting closely to her slender figure, with a wide-brimmed hat wreathed with leaves. In her ears were a pair of long, thin jade earrings, but she wore no other jewellery. Her delicacy and grace embellished and accentuated the sturdy strength of her boy.

Rose looked up, smilingly conscious of the gaze of Rostron and her friend, and she saw a man, standing a little way behind them, apparently watching her with equal admiration.

Eugene Milrake!

If a hundred voices had shouted his name in the silence, if she could suddenly have seen his face in a hundred mirrors hanging in the trees, the shock could not have been greater or more bewildering.

She had often wondered how they would meet—if they ever met—but no one in the world had been farther from her thoughts at that minute.

She stared at him blankly for a second, her beautiful eyes shadowed by the hand she had raised to shield them from the light in looking at her friends.

She was conscious of the momentary physical pain that follows a quickened heart-beat, but of nothing else. The ground seemed to sway.

Then "I am going to die!" passed through her mind as clearly as if she had heard the words spoken. The trees and grass were blurred to her sight. She instinctively gripped the child's shoulder where her left hand was laid.

The next minute she had recovered her self-possession, and moved towards Nannie, smiling once more, with no outward sign of her agitation except in the pallor of cheeks and lips.

"What is the matter, Rose?" exclaimed the pearl stringer.

"Nothing!" she answered, sharply, and walked on, passing Eugene Milrake.

Nannie had only seen him once or twice, and Rostron had never seen him. He looked after them all curiously, hesitated for a minute, and then followed slowly, pondering what to do.

Eugene was hurt—wounded—humiliated. His emotion, at the unexpected appearance of his old love, had been as painful as her own. That he should feel utterly ashamed would have struck him, until they met, as impossible, even absurd. Of course he had behaved thoughtlessly and inconsiderately. He acknowledged that, and had paid the penalty in many bitter minutes of self-reproach.

But after all—he knew the world and he knew men—what had he done? Jilted the girl. Well! It might have been so much worse. That had been his consolation during all the years of their separation.

He knew she had become the wife of Challis. He hated Challis, but approved the marriage. She would be happy, and he wanted her to be happy.

Eugene had not loved Rose as passionately as he had loved two or three other women—his wife, for one, when first he knew her—but the very fact that enabled him to forgive himself for deserting her, that it might have been so much worse, added to his poignant sensation of misery and joy in seeing her again.

How beautiful she looked! He reproached himself for having undervalued, or forgotten, her beauty.

She had ignored him with a certain dignity that pricked his pride.

Suddenly the question flashed into his mind—why was he following her? It was foolish, unfair! He was deliberately seeking a rebuff, and stopped,

frowning at the distant figures of the friends and the child.

They had turned into the shade of a cluster of trees, but he could still see the gleam of Nannie's white coat.

Eugene Milrake stood still, for several seconds, torn between his desire to speak to Rose and his dread of approaching her ; but he had never lacked boldness, and his motive was not wholly devoid of honour.

If she could have forgiven him and let him go, her magnanimity would have saved her from farther pursuit, for on this fatal day, if never again, Eugene deeply regretted the past, realised his own treachery, and looked upon Rose as a being far beyond his reach.

But Rose was not capable of such magnanimity. She was glad when he spoke to her—she forced herself to take his hand—for the sake of revenge. It was not the least important factor in their unhappy relations that she never understood Eugene. When she saw him at his best, after their long parting, she doubted his sincerity. It was in her power then to influence and rule him, but every word she spoke, every glance of her angry eyes, lessened that power.

He was prepared to be worthy of the pardon of an angel, but she made him defend himself against the contempt of a scornful woman. In giving him an opportunity to speak to her alone, by sending Rostron, Nannie and the child into one of the hot-houses, Rose intended, not to hear his apology and be rid of him, but to prolong the wretchedness and shame that she knew he felt.

She had introduced him to Rostron and recalled Nannie to his recollection, with well-assumed indifference. Even the pearl stringer was deceived. Rose looked so unruffled and self-possessed. The colour had returned to her face. She spoke lightly of having recognised him in the blue-bell walk, but believed herself mistaken as he had not greeted her at once.

"Perhaps you had forgotten me, as I confess I had nearly forgotten you, Mr. Milrake!" she said, smilingly.

They all strolled on together, Rose still trailing her parasol behind her on the grass, while she talked to Rostron. The storm of her agitation was succeeded by a calm. She caught herself listening to Eugene, as he walked behind her with Nannie, but there was no longer any difficulty in mastering her own voice. She did not even turn her head. Her eyes followed the child, scampering in front of them. Then they reached some hot-houses. The pearl stringer and Rostron delighted in all flowers. Solomon was already trying to turn the door handle, but Rose hung back.

"It's too hot!" she said, languidly; "I will wait for you here."

Eugene went to the door and opened it, then he said a word to Nannie, held the door open for Rostron to pass in, and turned to rejoin Rose.

They walked a few steps in silence. Then they stopped, as of one accord, and looked at each other.

Her face flushed and paled again. She compressed her lips and studied him under half-closed

eyelids. He began to plead with her in the old way, but in words that expressed nothing of the old love.

He implored her to be merciful and cursed his own weakness, but every word rang of the past. There was no present in Eugene's repentance.

"I was false! I was unworthy! I was heart-broken!" he cried.

He might have been an old man, she an old woman, by the impersonal tone of his flood of eloquence.

Rose answered briefly, and she did not spare him. For once in his life he heard the truth. It stung and silenced. The last word seemed to have been spoken between them. There was no more to be said.

The knowledge of their old love shamed them both. That all the romance—the beauty—the joy of it should end thus!

Eugene stood irresolute. He could not bear to leave her. She had awakened a wild conflict of emotions in his breast, but the strongest of them all was elementary, untouched by her anger, unaffected by their quarrel—the passion that he called love.

His love, never wholly extinguished in his heart, suddenly flamed and burnt. Remorse left him. He was on the defensive in a minute, still eager for her forgiveness, but no longer in contrition, only to win back the confidence he had lost.

Rose did not speak again. She felt weary and oppressed, anxious to be alone, agitated by his near presence.

"I have been very unhappy!" said Eugene.

She turned her head towards him, without raising her eyes from the grass. It was no longer necessary to assume indifference. He felt the sting of its reality.

"My poor little fortune is just enough to keep body and soul together," he went on, with intense self-pity. "My wife is dead. My child is dead. I have been very ill—my whole life is a failure."

Her face changed. She looked at him sadly and questioningly. There was all of the pettish, old Eugene in his voice, but she realised, for the first time, how much he had altered. The boyish exuberance—the light, agile figure—the fresh complexion—everything that had attracted and appealed to the girl sprang to the recollection of the woman.

"You see!" he exclaimed.

The two words, and the gesture that gave them point, expressed his contemptuous opinion of himself, but the feeling was momentary.

"I have no regrets!" he said, quickly, as if she had accused him of squandering his youth; "I have lived my life in my own way—not your way, my white angel!"

She started violently, with an involuntary movement that widened the distance between them. The sudden change in his voice, not the actual words he used, struck the broken chord of her old love. The lost music that it recalled rang through her whole being.

All her strength of purpose—all her anger—all

that she had suffered—were swept away. The world only held Eugene. He had come back to her!

She did not speak, but her eyes filled with tears. He was astounded into silence, unable to understand that the sound of his voice, a mere note in his voice, had wrought this miracle.

He watched the tears brim over, hang upon her eyelashes, and slowly fall. For a man who had long studied women, Eugene's surprise confessed his bewilderment.

"Dear! You forgive me—at last?"

"Yes, I forgive you."

"Dear! You still love me? I have loved you, in spite of everything."

"No, Eugene."

She pressed her clenched hand against her forehead, her beauty darkened by an expression of physical pain.

"I feel as if I were going mad!" she said; then, looking at him pleadingly under her drawn brows, "Go away from me! Leave me!"

He picked up the gloves she had dropped upon the ground and put them in her hand, grasping it firmly.

"I must see you again. I must!" he said.

"No!"

He glanced towards the opening door of the hot-house. Her child and her friends were coming out.

"I will come to your house. Why not? Rose! Why not?" he said, very quickly and softly, releasing her hand. "Why shouldn't we meet?"

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We're not fools—we're not boy and girl any longer
—we're friends—old friends—that's all——"

"No, Eugene. You mustn't come."

"I must! I will! Are you afraid of me?
Rose!"

The sound of the child's voice and the ripple of the pearl stringer's laugh interrupted his hoarse whisper.

"Pull yourself together!" he said, sharply.

Then he smiled, lifted his hat, and walked away.

No other words had passed between them, but from that hour Rose Challis lived in the hell that we call Fear—fear of herself, fear of the terrible man whose passion had once awakened her own, haunting fear of her woman's weakness, shuddering fear of his man's strength.

Let the brave and virtuous pity her! She is struggling for a victory that is theirs without a fight. Her heart and mind are bewildered and corrupted by the thoughts she cannot banish. She hates herself. She prays wildly in the dead hours of night. Her every sense is strained to welcome the step—the voice—the dear, hated presence of her enemy.

They are rarely alone together, but she is always conscious of his mute separation of her from all others. She is oppressed by a feeling of bondage. She knows he watches and waits his opportunity, then—the low, indistinct word, the pleading eyes, the quick touch—trifles are fraught with terrible meanings.

All these are secret things. They are hidden from her best friend. They hang, like a lurid veil,

between herself and her husband. They make her cling to her child—and shrink away from him. She weeps for her lost peace, and content, and innocent mirth.

So she drifts, drifts, drifts—the shadowed woman—with only the far, faint light of the Spirit of the Innermost to save her from the sin that her soul abhors.

CHAPTER XVII

MR. CHALLIS expressed little surprise at the reappearance of Eugene Milrake. Curiosity was as alien to his nature as jealousy.

He did not ask where Eugene had lived since he left Bayswater, or what he had been doing. His chief feeling seemed to be sorrow at the news of the death of Milrake's girl-wife at the birth of her child.

The bereaved husband himself showed remarkable fortitude, considering that his grief was not a year old. He lived in rooms in Pimlico, the only lodger of a well-paid, most attentive landlady.

Mr. Challis questioned him, the first time he called at the dentist's house, on his old political views. Eugene laughed and confessed that the subject had lost its interest. Rose spoke of his poetry. Then he became eloquent. Prose and poetry, he said, were alike absorbing.

It appeared that he had written several plays, as yet unacted, and published, partly at his own expense, a small book of verses.

Rose was given a copy, with a poem to herself written on the fly-leaf. She left the book, on purpose, where it would attract her husband's attention. A poor little device to salve her con-

science at accepting, and understanding, its tribute of admiration.

She watched Mr. Challis read it. He made no remark, but laid down the book and began to whistle. She marvelled, not for the first time, at his extraordinary denseness. They were alone together in the drawing-room.

"Well, what do you think of Eugene's dedication?" she asked.

Mr. Challis looked puzzled.

"Dedication?" he repeated. "I don't think I read it."

"The poem on the fly-leaf, dedicating the book to me," she answered, a little breathlessly.

"It's all right, my dear, for people who care about that sort of thing," said Challis, "but I know that it doesn't appeal to a woman of your good sense."

"Is that all you have to say?" she asked.

"I think so," he replied thoughtfully. "You see, I never can take Eugene seriously. He potters at poetry, just like he used to potter in the workshop. He's indefinite and vague. Wishy-washy!"

"How strangely you have always misunderstood Eugene!" exclaimed Rose.

Challis pondered a minute, as if it were a new idea.

"Have I?" he asked. "What is your own opinion, after all this time?"

Rose leaned back in her chair, her hands clasped on her knees. She was outwardly cool and unconcerned, but inwardly raging at the

blindness of her husband. Had he forgotten that Eugene was her old lover? Was he indifferent to her peace? Did no suspicion of the man lurk in his mind? How could she tell him—what was there to tell?

Challis, hearing Solomon rattling at the door handle, forgot that he had asked her a question.

"Sydney," she said, as he rose to admit the child, "do you object to Eugene Milrake coming here?"

"No, my dear, of course not," he answered, good-naturedly. "Invite him if you like, but not too often. I'm sure we should get tired of him. Well, Old Sol, what's the news?"

Old Sol, carrying a china saucer of soap-suds and a couple of straws for pipes, entered the room in his own solemn manner.

"Hullo! I don't think we'll be allowed to blow bubbles in the drawing-room, Sol!" exclaimed his father.

He glanced at his wife, but she was not looking at him or the child.

"Then out us go to the garden," answered Solomon.

"I really think it would be better, old man," said Mr. Challis.

So they went into the garden. The little boy looked up at the sun, faintly shining through fleecy clouds.

"'Ail, great Poller!" he said, casually.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Mr. Challis.

"I don't know," said Solomon, stirring up the soap-suds. "Mr. Rostron says that, so I say it."

"I expect Mr. Rostron said, 'Hail, great Apollo!' when the sun burst out," said Challis.

"Yes, in the morning in Kensitter Gardens," agreed Solomon. "There he is now, bustin' out—'Ail, great Poller! Now, daddy, blow!'"

Rose, left to herself, walked up and down the drawing-room with a hurried step. She had seen Eugene Milrake twice since their meeting in Kew Gardens. In his presumption in coming to her house on the following day; in his cordiality to her husband; in his fluent justification to herself; in every word he had spoken; in the gift of his poems, with the verse that Challis had read so carelessly—it was as if he had cast a spell over her.

She could have refused to see him, but alas! his hold upon her past life was too strong. It was not the Eugene of to-day she longed to see. It was the Eugene of yesterday.

After a while she knelt down by the back window, her arms folded on the sill, to watch her husband and child. How strong and independent they looked, each in his own way, the big man and the small boy.

Challis had given up his straw for a real pipe and was sitting on a low stool, criticising the efforts of his son. Bumble, the dog, was lying beside him.

Solomon, with feet wide-planted and cheeks out-blown, tossed the gleaming bubbles into the air, as seriously as if his life depended upon it, but occasionally stopped to jump with delight.

If only Rose had had the courage to call to her husband and throw herself into his arms—desper-

ately, passionately, as on the night when he told her of his love—she knew in her secret heart that he would forgive her.

Pride held her back, for what was there to forgive? He would not understand. He was good, kind, loyal; a plain, blunt man, without subtlety. Her conception of his character had never changed. She realised this, with a strange and altogether new sense of loneliness. In spite of their marriage, their life together, and their child, he was still a dear old friend and nothing more—Mr. Challis, the dentist.

She thought of Nannie Mordaunt, far away in a wilderness of streets, sitting at her work-table, stringing pearls. How easily life flowed on for Nannie! She little suspected the torment of Rose's mind. The pearl stringer was such a simple girl, so sweet, so good, so transparent.

The tears softly fell on her clasped hands. In the old days she had never cried, unless it were with rage at her poverty or ill luck, but her meeting with Eugene Milrake had had an effect on her nerves, making for physical weakness and lack of self-control.

Always inclined to introspection, she had reached a period of emotional development that baffled herself. She could not fathom the meaning of her own unhappiness.

The complexity of human nature as a whole is so patent to us all that we forget, too readily, the equal complexity of every unit.

If Rose had loved Eugene Milrake, fraught as it might have been with terrible consequences, the

problem would be easier to solve, but she did not love him ; on the other hand, he did not appeal to what we call for lack of a comprehensive word, her lower nature. Eugene was not of the villain type of play or novel ; his conduct was villainous, but that is a very different matter. Rose was swayed by the man's personality and by what was good in him even more than by what was evil.

The colour of the sun died out of the sky, as she knelt by the window, and she saw her husband and the boy disappear into the workshop.

Mr. Challis had some work to finish. Thomas and his other assistant were absent. Solomon climbed on to one of the stools, where he could watch his father. He was generally silent in the workshop, being too interested for ordinary conversation.

Mr. Challis whistled softly to himself as he filed and polished, with an occasional break in the tune while he considered his progress.

"Would you like to be a dentist when you grow up, Old Sol?" he asked, during one of these pauses. Old Sol shook his head.

"I forgot!" exclaimed his father. "You want to drive an engine, don't you?"

"I want to make a engine," said the little boy.

"Do you? It's a stiff job, Old Sol, to make some of the engines I showed you at South Kensington Museum. Do you remember how they worked?"

Solomon scrambled off his stool and ran backwards and forwards, imitating the pistons. Then he returned to his seat, breathless.

"I must take you again to the Museum," said his father.

"Can I take myself when I'm five?" asked Solomon.

"No, I'm afraid you will not be quite old enough, even then, to go by yourself as far as that," said Mr. Challis.

Solomon pondered a minute.

"Can I take myself when I'm fifty, dad?"

"Yes, I hope I shall be able to trust you alone by that time, Old Sol. What else do you want to do when you're fifty?"

Again Solomon meditated before answering.

"I shall let ever'body come and play wiv my toys—Olly, an' you, an' Mr. Jollson (Mr. Jollson was Olly's latest admirer), an' the lil' boy wiv a dirty face at the corner shop, an' lil' Milly and her baby brother, an'—an'——"

Solomon paused to remember his other friends, but failing to think of their names added in a loud voice——

"An' Bumble an' a li-on!"

"Why, what will the lion do, Old Sol?"

"When I'm tired of playin' wiv the people," explained Old Sol, "the li-on will eat 'em all up!"

"Oh, now I understand why you are going to invite him," said Mr. Challis. "But you didn't mention your mother, Solly. Don't you want her to go to your party when you're fifty?"

"I shall live wiv my mother," said Sol, adding, to make the point clear, "she will be always there, like the table, an' the clock, an' the ceilin'."

Mr. Challis laid his big hand on the child's hair and drew the little face close to his own with unspeakable tenderness.

"God bless you, Old Sol!" he said, under his breath.

The child, quick to take advantage of his father's mood, again scrambled off the stool.

"Let me sit on your knee and file!" he pleaded.

"Well—come along!" said Mr. Challis.

He put an old, blunt file into Solomon's hand and gave him a bit of vulcanite.

Solomon set to work with his head bent down over the table, his bright waves of hair shading his face. Challis, holding him closely in one arm, brushed them aside and softly rubbed the flushed little cheek with the back of his hand. Then he turned towards the window and looked at the waving branches of the trees.

His expression was sad and thoughtful, as of a man who, with quiet resignation, the secret sorrow of a apparently happy, successful life.

CHAPTER XVIII

"**W**HAT has become of your Mr. Rostron, Nan?" asked Perth Mordaunt.

The brother and sister were in Perth's sitting-room, at a private boarding-house in Storey Street, Bloomsbury.

Nannie was in her best dress—white silk blouse, tight blue skirt, buttoned and braided—in honour of her first visit.

Perth was lying on the sofa, smoking a cigarette in an amber holder.

He had changed for the better, in appearance and manner, during the past few years. His hair was no longer smoothed into a flat curl on his forehead, as in the early days of his membership of the Tee Family; the well-cut lounge suit, the rather showy turquoise pin in his tie, the handkerchief up his sleeve, the pale lavender socks, the Parma violets in his buttonhole—every detail marked the stage he had reached of evolution from an untidy, careless boy to a successful citizen of the show world.

He had recently severed his immediate connection with the parent Tees, having gone into partnership with one of the younger branches, who

brought humour and capital to the venture, while Perth supplied the brains.

"Perth and Pill" were the professional names chosen by the two young men. They were equally skilful jugglers, but Mr. Pill had none of Perth's inventive faculty and deferred to his partner's opinion in everything connected with their turn.

It was all a mystery to Nannie—how they obtained engagements, how they produced their small "illusions," and how they managed, greatest wonder of all, to earn so much money.

She wished that her brother would live at home, but he had grown to look upon the little shop and house in Colet Street as far too humble and poor for a young fellow in his position. It did very well for a pearl stringer, it was an excellent address for trade, he said, but not at all suitable for a member of his profession.

The boarding-house, or small private hotel, in Storey Street was much frequented by American variety artistes. Mr. Pill, when they were in London, retired to the parental mansion in Brixton, where he could drive Mr. Tee's dogcart and lounge in the luxury of Mrs. Tee's plush furniture.

Pill was inclined to be lazy. Perth, on the contrary, practised and worked for the betterment of their performance with the dogged energy that had characterised his original attempts at sleight-of-hand tricks, in the kitchen at home, when he was a boy.

"What has become of your Mr. Rostron, Nan?" he asked, suddenly, with his eyes on the light curl of smoke from his cigarette.

"Mr. Rostron has gone abroad," his sister answered. "I have not seen him for several months."

"Does he write to you?"

Nannie shook her head with a slight smile.

"No, but sometimes he sends me pictures of the beautiful places where he goes."

"Postcards, I suppose?"

"No, photographs or sketches. I keep them all in a box. They are so lovely, Perth—the water-colour drawings, I mean. Mr. Rostron says he can't paint, but he makes you feel the sunshine and the light. It's wonderful! He has been to Bavaria, and Austria, and Italy, and——"

"Ah! Pill and I must look out for a good continental tour," interrupted Perth: "I want to see something of the world. We get some jolly good shows from abroad, but I think America runs the foreigners very hard. D'you know, Nan, the best illusionist we've got, among the younger men, is a Yankee? I wonder what your Mr. Rostron, who seems to think so much of the old, played-out countries, would say to that?"

"You speak as if you disliked Mr. Rostron, Perth."

Nannie thought of the many little gifts of money her brother had received, unknown to himself, from her friend.

"I don't dislike the fellow," said Perth, with a wave of the hand that held the amber cigarette-holder; "I am quite indifferent to him. Your partiality is a mystery to me. He doesn't treat you like an equal, you know, Nan. He never

invites you to his house, or introduces you to his friends, does he?"

"That doesn't trouble me in the least, Perth," said the pearl stringer; "I don't want to know his friends. They are very grand people. I should be far too nervous and awkward to talk to them," and Nannie trembled at the mere thought.

"Can't agree with you," said Perth, with a touch of his old sullen manner; "I don't see why *my* sister shouldn't be equal to anybody in his set. I'm going to be rich, Nan. You don't take it in. You don't realise my opportunities."

"Indeed I appreciate your great talents, dear!" she cried, and, rising from her chair, stooped over the head of the sofa and kissed him. "Nobody could be more proud of you than I am, Perth."

"That's a good girl!" he answered, graciously.

He got to his feet and began to pace the room.

"Of course I shall get rid of Pill, later on, when I feel I'm strong enough to work alone," he said. "Pill is a decent fellow, and he's very generous. No doubt Pill has his good points, remarkably good points, but he isn't ambitious. He has no originality——"

At that minute, as if to vindicate his character in the show world, who should walk into the room but Mr. Pill Tee himself.

A short, round-faced, cheerful young man was Pill, in a mustard-coloured check suit and red tie, with white spats over his highly polished boots. He carried a cane with a big silver knob, and was shadowed by a particularly ugly, white bulldog.

"'Ullol 'Ullol 'Ullol!" cried Pill, bursting in

without knocking, but instantly checking himself at the sight of Perth's visitor.

"My sister," said Perth, before his friend had time to wink; "Nan, this is my partner, Mr. George Tee."

"Ow! Don't say that!" exclaimed the newcomer, removing his hat and advancing with outstretched hand to Nannie. "Don't call me George, Miss Mordaunt. Call me Pill. Everybody calls me Pill."

"You were christened George," said Perth, obstinately.

"Well, ma didn't want the curate to drop the baby into the font," rejoined Mr. Tee; "Pill is a kind of a pet name, you see, Miss Mordaunt. It isn't short for pillar-box as you might suppose. Belle! Come and see the lady. Don't be frightened of her, Miss Mordaunt, she's the mildest best-tempered old thing that ever breathed."

Belle, the bulldog, with her red, watery eyes and terrible under-jaw, advanced obediently to receive Nannie's gentle patting, then retired under the table, where she could watch her master's every movement.

"Well, Perth, old chap, how goes it?" asked Mr. Tee. "Where was you all day yesterday? They expected you up at our place."

"I was working, Pill," replied his partner, severely; "I was hammering out an improvement of our vanishing bottle trick."

"Good boy!" exclaimed the other; "I was kept rather busy myself. We was at Madame Tussaud's in the morning, the Zoo in the afternoon, had a bit

of dinner at the Cancan, and went to the 'Pav' afterwards."

"You won't be able to waste your time like that when we start work next week," said Perth.

"No, but she'll have gone on tour before then," said Pill.

"Or you will have got over it," said his friend, scornfully.

"P'raps—p'raps not!" said Pill, with a sigh, followed by a wink.

These words were Greek to Nannie. She did not know that they referred to a young lady to whom her brother's partner was temporarily devoted. Mr. Tee's one idea of winning favour with his ever-changing sweethearts was to give them continual treats. He had been known to accompany a girl with a taste for entertainments to six theatres, four music halls, and eight cinematograph shows in one week.

"To tell the truth," said Pill, in a burst of candour, "I'm getting a bit fed up with her relations. We only went to Madame Tussaud's because she's got an aunt and three nephews up from the country."

"Did you take them all with you?" asked Perth.

"Yes!" said Pill, "but that wasn't as bad as the Zoo. We took her gran'ma to the Zoo, Perth, in an invalid's chair. I wheeled it!"

He shook his head dolefully for a minute and then gave vent to a loud laugh. Nannie laughed too, although she had not followed the conversation, because the round-faced young man looked so very happy and simple and good-natured.

"What a fool you are, Pill! Anybody can impose on you!" exclaimed Perth.

His friend only laughed again. Then, suddenly recollecting there was a girl in the room, suggested they should go out to supper.

He believed in taking every nice girl he met out to supper, or to lunch, or to eat ices, or to buy sweets.

"We've only just had tea," said Nannie.

"Never mind that," rejoined Pill. "We'll stroll down to the Strand to get up our appetites. If you object to Belle going with us, Miss Mordaunt, we'll leave her here."

"Oh, no, why should I object?" said Nannie.

"I thought you mightn't like to be seen with her and me at the same time—Beauty and the Beast, you know!"

Nannie laughed at his obvious little joke, and he entertained her, while Perth was changing his boots, by juggling with ornaments on the mantelpiece, balancing his silver-topped cane on his chin, and giving a life-like imitation of a monkey he had especially admired at the Zoological Gardens.

Then they strolled to the Cancan, Mr. Tee's favourite restaurant, in a street off the Strand.

The attention that they attracted on the way was rather embarrassing to Nannie, and she was a little surprised at her brother's evident satisfaction. The showman's love of advertisement, in and out of season, was a trait in his character she did not comprehend.

Perth, with his light grey overcoat and amber cigarette holder, walked along as if the street

belonged to him. Pill never lowered his voice or left off talking in the busiest places, and looked, in his check suit, a cross between a music-hall singer dressed for the stage and a groom. Belle, the ugliest dog in London, or out of it, was in the habit of following him so closely that she seemed to be perpetually trying to lick his heels, and her appearance called forth many exclamations of abhorrence or amusement from people who did not know the sterling qualities hidden by her outward seeming.

The Cancan was small, popular, and crowded. Mr. Tee, after a jocular greeting to the head waiter, steered his friends to a table in a corner. Belle instantly crept underneath, as a dog accustomed to the place.

The heat of the room; the clatter of knives and forks; the noisy voices successfully drowning a small orchestra hidden, as if the proprietor were ashamed of its fruitless efforts, behind a screen of plants; the mingled odours of baked meats, spirits, tobacco, and coffee; the harassed faces of the waiters; the eager people, all eating and talking at once; everything she saw and heard jarred upon Nannie Mordaunt.

Of course she did not show it. She never talked much—except, on occasion, to Henry Rostron—but she smiled at Pill's jokes, looked proudly at her brother, and wore the expression that was habitual to her, pleased and pleasing.

Pill admired her very much. He called her, in his own mind, a little mouse, and did his best to entertain her with anecdotes of the Tee Family.

The pearl stringer's education in the manners and customs of the show world advanced rapidly. Pill had been on the stage all his life ; he could talk of nothing else.

When Nannie, thinking of Rostron's travels, questioned him about Berlin or Vienna, all he could tell her was the size of the different halls where his people had "topped the bill." He regarded India as a swamp, where the chief industry was collecting cobras for the benefit of native and foreign snake charmers. He failed to understand Great Britain's interest in South Africa, because it is a well-known fact that all the lions required by menageries or wild-beast trainers can be bred in this country. When Perth mentioned a certain politician whose name is quite well known, his friend looked puzzled for a second and then exclaimed :

"Ah! You mean So-and-So and Thompson, performers on the double wire, don't you? You're right, he's one of the smartest fellows we've got."

Perth corrected the error rather sharply, but Pill only laughed, quite unabashed by his ignorance.

"I never take any stock in Members of Parliament," he said, "as long as they mind their own business and don't interfere with us."

"They do interfere sometimes," said Perth. "They make laws, you know, regarding our work, 'Dangerous Stage Performances,' and so on."

"It's a shame!" exclaimed Pill. "As if we didn't know how to take care of ourselves! How do they know what's a dangerous stage performance? The most simple tricks you see on the bars may be just

as difficult, and three times as risky, as the most showy part of the act."

"I suppose the idea is to protect women and children," said Nannie.

"That's all right," agreed Pill, picking out his walnuts with a pocket knife. "The law's bound to take care of the kiddies, although you can't begin to train him too young if you want to make a fine acrobat of a boy. Don't train him regular, you know, but just encourage him. Why, my brother Alf learned himself to do 'the splits' without help from anybody before he was five years old."

"'The splits' is the feat of stretching the legs out straight from the hips on each side," explained Perth. "How did Alf manage it?"

"Got a broom out of the kitchen, stood with his back to the parlour door and let himself down on the ground by degrees, a little bit lower every day, hanging on to the broom handle to steady himself. But to go back to what you said about the law protecting women in the show business, Miss Mordaunt. You can train a girl just as easy as a boy, if you take care of her."

"Are their nerves as strong?" asked Nannie.

"Don't you fret!" exclaimed Pill. "Strong nerves! They're better than boys in certain branches. You never saw a man give a high kick as gracefully as a lady. Of course they're not suitable to heavy work, or a knockabout 'stunt'—it wouldn't be right or feminine—but I think they're perfect in their own way. Strong nerves!" repeated Pill. "There's nothing like our business to keep you fit. Look 'ere! An aunt of my

mother's, our old Aunt Polly, has been a high-wire walker since she was six years old. She's an awfully nervous little woman in private life, nearly jumps out of her skin if you say Bo! but you could fire off a cannon within a dozen yards of her when she's on the wire, and she wouldn't turn a hair."

"Does she still perform?" asked Perth.

"I should say so," replied Pill. "The public can't see how old she is when she's a hundred feet over their heads, and she always wears a blonde wig, of course. Why, that little woman supported an invalid husband for fifteen years, and brought up their five children simply grand, all on her own earnings. We're all of us proud of Aunt Polly."

"Why don't you help her to retire?" asked Nannie.

Pill laughed.

"Bless the dear old girl! She could have retired years ago, for all her children and grandchildren are doing well, but she won't give it up! She says that it keeps her spry. You ask any old showman, if you can find one, what he thinks of Mademoiselle Marie, the Little Wonder on the Wire, and then you'll appreciate my aunt Polly."

The pearl stringer thought that Pill's affectionate admiration for his family became him very well. She wondered whether it would be possible for him to do anything for her father, for she always cherished the belief that the best part of Professor Mordaunt's professional career lay still before him. It was the one point on which she differed from Perth. It would have been indiscreet, therefore,

to discuss the subject with Pill in the presence of her brother. She determined to make an opportunity to speak to him alone.

Nannie had long finished her supper, but her companions were too much attached to the Cancan to leave it readily. Pill could no more have gone away while there were fruits and nuts left on the table than a squirrel could ignore a filbert, and Perth, who could idle as thoroughly as he could work, found the scene in a restaurant as amusing as a scene in a play.

All the tables near them had changed visitors. Nannie's eyes wandered over the emptying room. The orchestra could now be plainly heard, playing a dull waltz.

Suddenly a look of surprise came into her face, unobserved by her companions. She saw Rose Challis, in a distant corner as dimly lighted as their own, with a man whom she instantly recognised as Eugene Milrake.

They had evidently entered the restaurant for the purpose of talking, not of dining, for they only seemed to have ordered coffee, that a waiter was at that minute pouring out. Directly he moved away Nannie saw her friend, with a little characteristic gesture of impatience, push her cup on one side, untasted. She put both elbows on the table and leaned her cheek against her clasped hands, her face turned towards Eugene, but with eyelids lowered over her eyes.

Nannie's first impulse had been to hurry across the room; her second was to watch them, without attracting the attention of her two companions,

for she was seized with a strange, unaccountable feeling of dismay.

It was so unreasonable and absurd, on second thoughts, that again she was on the point of rising from her chair. Why in the world should she be dismayed at seeing Rose Challis alone with Milrake? But she did not move.

Perth and his partner began to discuss their work. They were soon too interested to notice Nannie.

Eugene, sipping his coffee, evidently talked without interruption. He looked particularly young, alert and handsome, like the Eugene of the old days of oratory in Hyde Park.

Now and again Rose laughed. Once he touched her hands, but she instantly moved away by jerking her chair towards the edge of the table. He seemed to remonstrate gaily for a minute. Then he spoke with great earnestness, frowning, and emphasising his words by nervous little raps on the tablecloth.

Nannie could never have acted the part of a spy ; she looked at her brother and Pill far more often than she looked across the room, but she could not help seeing—again with that strange, unaccountable feeling of dismay—that Rose was absorbed in her companion.

Rose listened intently, putting in a word now and again, but more often expressing assent or disapproval by a quick glance, a shrug of the shoulders, or a gesture of the hand. A cluster of big, Malmaison carnations was fastened on her coat. Sometimes she touched them caressingly.

Flowers, Nannie knew, were Rose Challis's perpetual delight and desire.

"Let's go!" exclaimed Perth, suddenly weary of his partner's talk, and interrupting him in the middle of the sentence.

"Right you are!" said the imperturbably good-tempered Pill. "We're always ready to move on, me and Belle. Come along, Belle!"

The bulldog instantly appeared, at the sound of her name, from under the table, blinking slowly and wagging her stump of a tail.

There was still some delay in leaving the restaurant, owing to a slight difference of opinion regarding the bill between Perth and the waiter. Nannie saw Rose and her companion go out, and, as she herself passed through the swing doors of the Cancan, they were parting from each other a little distance down the street.

Eugene was still talking earnestly; when Rose turned away he followed her for a few steps, but she looked over her shoulder and dismissed him with a short, sharp sentence. He stopped abruptly, lifted his hat, and allowed her to depart.

After walking quickly for a short distance she paused at the edge of the kerb, and signalled to a passing taxi. Nannie had lost sight of her in the busy street.

Rose leaned back in the cab, her eyes closed, the droop of her whole figure expressive of utter weariness. She had given the chauffeur the address of her house in Bayswater.

After a while she roused herself, straightened her hat by the aid of a tiny mirror she carried in

her hand-bag, and unpinned the handful of carnations on her coat. She looked at the flowers for a minute, charmed by their coral pink, and then—reluctantly for the sake of their beauty, joyfully in that they were the gift of Eugene—watched an opportunity to throw them out of the taxi window into the mud of the road.

CHAPTER XIX

"**D**O all the pearls of the sea find their way to your little work-table?" asked Henry Rostron.

It was his first visit to Colet Street after his return to England.

"Oh, no, Mr. Rostron!" exclaimed Nannie, who was still inclined to take his speeches too literally.

"You must string hundreds of rows in a year, Anie."

"We do a very good business," said the silent aunt.

She so rarely joined in their conversation that both her niece and Rostron looked at her curiously. She was evidently in a communicative mood, but went on working as she talked, picking up the broken threads of a wide collar of artificial pearls and rubies.

"All the shops round us have changed since I was a girl," she said, "but the trade sticks to its old friends."

"Do you mean jewellers by 'the trade'?" asked Rostron.

"Yes, and silversmiths and diamond merchants, all of 'em," said Miss Grey, comprehensively. "Every branch changes, but we don't."

"Will our style of work never change, aunt?" said Nannie.

"In details, lovey, but that's all," was the answer. "So long as there are pearls taken out of the sea we shall go on. We shall go on!"

She tied the stringers' cunning knot in her silken thread with a little sigh.

"Perhaps they will invent a machine, some day, to do our work, aunt," said Nannie.

The grey-haired woman shook her head, stretched out her thin hand, and twisted it about in the air.

"It takes the oldest machine in the world—ten fingers—to string pearls," she said.

Nannie glanced at her own hands, of the same type, and then at Rostron.

"Was I created only to do this work?" was the thought that passed through her mind.

The silent aunt spoke no more. She finished the collar, packed it neatly in a cardboard box covered with tissue paper, and then, having no more work on hand, began to read the *Life of Frances Ridley Havergal*, a book that afforded her endless pleasure.

Rostron had much to tell Nannie, but more to hear. He made her describe the performance of Perth; and Pill, questioned her about the books and magazines she had been reading, the walks she had taken during his absence, and all other interests and duties that filled her quiet life. Although she talked as freely as usual, he noticed that there was a slight restraint in her manner; her expression was thoughtful, even troubled, and she did not laugh as often, or as light-heartedly, as he knew she could.

When they were alone, the quiet aunt having carried off her book to the sitting-room downstairs, Rostron tried to solve the simple mystery.

"Have you anything else to tell me, Anie?" he asked. "What is it that is making you sad or frightened?"

"How you read my thoughts!" she exclaimed, in a voice that vibrated with sudden emotion. "You make me feel like a child, Mr. Rostron."

"My dear little Anie!"

He always called her by the Indian word for a fine pearl, but she rarely had the courage to call him by his own chosen name, Kalippo.

"Yes, I am both troubled and frightened," Nannie went on, "but it's so vague, indefinite, I can't explain it to myself."

"Tell me."

"No!" she shook her head decisively. "It is impossible to tell you anything—even you—for it is not my secret, Mr. Rostron. It concerns somebody for whom I care very much."

"Can I help you in any way? Can I help the somebody for whom you care?" asked Rostron.

He was, as a rule, the most incurious of men, but her voice had suggested a thought that made him very tender. He would have given much to know that a man's love had brought happiness to his little pearl stringer, and was eager to know the man and judge his worthiness. With this idea in his mind he spoke again.

"If you have made a new friend in my absence—or perhaps discovered that some old friend is far dearer than you suspected—it will be safe to trust me with

your confidence, Anie. I may be able to advise you."

She shook her head again, dipping her fingers in and out of her box of tiny seed pearls. Rostron smiled kindly.

"You remember when we read 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' together, Anie? Isn't it Lysander who tells Hermia that the course of true love never did run smooth? Well, it is as true to-day as it was in Athens in the time of the great duke Theseus, but a staid old friend, like myself, is often able to steady the course."

Nannie looked up, her eyes meeting his with the long, patient gaze he knew so well.

"You are mistaken, Mr. Rostron. My vague unhappiness is not connected in any way with—love," she answered, hesitating but a moment on the word.

"You are sure of that, Anie?" he still persisted, for she had blushed faintly. "You are sure there is no new anxiety in your simple life? Nothing that you can tell me to increase your happiness?"

"No, Mr. Rostron. It is kind of you to ask—generous and good—but no! no! no!"

She let the seed pearls drop through her fingers slowly into their little box; a smile as faint as her blush passed over her face, like a glint of sunshine over a stream, leaving it shadowy and very still.

Rostron said no more. He had believed himself possessed of her every thought, entirely in her confidence, but the secret of her gentle heart was hidden from him.

Nannie's indefinite anxiety was connected with her dear friend, Rose Challis. She had seen little of Rose. Eugene Milrake, she knew, was frequently at the house in Bayswater. Nannie, with a subtle feeling of shame, tried to forget the scene in the Cancan Restaurant, but it haunted her like a bad dream.

In her working hours, when she was out of doors, even when Rostron sat beside her, she was conscious of a growing, nameless dread. It did not affect her words or conduct, but she could not shake it off.

Her friendship with her brother's partner added not a little pleasure to the life of the whole family in Colet Street.

Mr. Pill Tee's lady-love having gone on tour he was free, for the time being, to devote himself to his professional work and his acquaintances. He was not at all a faithful lover; to be out of Pill's sight was to be out of his mind, as far as girls were concerned, but he was a particularly kind and cheerful friend.

He liked Nannie very much; she was a girl, in his own words, with no dashed nonsense about her. She did not mistake a fellow's intentions—Pill, as a matter of fact, never had any serious intentions—and she was quite good looking enough to satisfy his good taste.

He generally made his appearance in Colet Street in the afternoon, with Belle at his heels, and always with an offering of flowers or sweets, or a magazine, or the latest novelty in street toys.

He made Mrs. Mordaunt shriek with laughter,

not by his wit, which was far to seek, but by his ingenuity in inventing small practical jokes. He renovated all Professor Mordaunt's conjuring apparatus, and treated the silent aunt with jocular affection.

Nannie consulted him about her father's professional work. He was not hopeful, for Pill, with all his vagaries, was true to the business and artistic traditions of the Tee family. He would not encourage a poor show.

"Don't you think my father is clever?" asked Nannie, one day when they were alone.

"He's all right, you know," answered Pill, "but he's not exactly up-to-date. I'm afraid they'd 'give him the bird,' if he reeled 'em a yard of patter between the tricks."

"'Give him the bird'?" repeated Nannie. "What do you mean?"

Pill hesitated to choose his words.

"Well, 'chip him' from the front, you know."

Nannie still looked puzzled.

"Well, I don't think the old boy would make a hit, dear," said Pill; "I'm afraid he wouldn't go for nuts. Of course, you never can't tell, as my dad says."

"He's a splendid ventriloquist," said Nannie.

"Immense!" exclaimed Pill, who could not bear to see her disappointed face. "But ventriloquism isn't as popular as it ought to be. My dad thinks the public taste is something shocking nowadays. Look at me and Perth! We've got to choke up our turn with comic stuff. I tell you, dear, I'm sick of playing the fool, but what else can I do?"

They don't want to see me act Shakespeare, you know. They wouldn't like it if I did!"

Pill shook his head gloomily for a minute, then burst out laughing.

"I do wish you could help father, Pill," said Nannie. "He only wants a good start."

The young man thoughtfully shook Belle from side to side, holding her by the massive under-jaw, before answering.

"I might be able to get him a trial show," he said, slowly.

"Oh, Pill, I should be so grateful!" cried Nannie.

"Keep it dark from Perth," advised her companion. "I don't want to get into a row, and he don't appreciate your dad's work."

With a new object in life—the return of her father to his professional triumphs—Nannie had less time to think of Rose Challis.

The Professor had to be provided with a new suit, there were daily rehearsals in the dining-room, and it was necessary to copy out and persuade him to blue pencil his ancient patter. The dolls for the ventriloquial part of the performance, sadly aged and faded by disuse, had to be re-stuffed and their faces "made up," by Pill's advice, with grease paint. As there would not be time for a change of costume, Professor Mordaunt decided to show his transformation into the character of Lieutenant Mordaunt by the simple addition of a sword-belt to his evening clothes, and a naval cap on his head.

At first his excitement had been tempered with nervousness, but it quickly wore off, leaving him

certain of success, proud of himself, unusually complacent and pompous.

"The great thing, Nannie, is to make an appearance," he frequently said to his daughter. "That's the alpha and omega of the artiste's career. Be seen, make a hit, come out!"

Pill shook his head a little doubtfully when this sentiment was repeated for his benefit.

"It's all very well to come out, if you don't go in again!" he muttered to himself.

The Tee influence obtained Professor Mordaunt the necessary first appearance, called a "trial turn," at a small suburban music hall. Perth was not informed until everything had been arranged. His contemptuous reception of the news was the only discordant note in Nannie's pleasure.

Henry Rostron was unable to be present, but he took a box and sent the ticket to Nannie on the day of the performance. She invited Rose Challis to accompany Mrs. Mordaunt and herself, but Rose pleaded another engagement.

"I am going to the theatre," she said, when Nannie gave her the invitation.

"With Sydney?" asked Nannie.

"Yes, and Eugene Milrake," answered her friend.

Professor Mordaunt set out for the music hall, on the eventful night, some time before his wife and daughter. Nannie, who had spent the afternoon in helping him to prepare, had never seen him in such high spirits. His big, wiry moustache was carefully waxed into points, and his new clothes made him look broader in the shoulders, less worn and shrunken.

She stood on the doorstep, watching him, until he turned the corner of the street. It was one of the proudest minutes of her life. She believed that he was taking not only the first step towards making a little fortune, but was on the point of renewing his youth and fulfilling the promises of a bright career.

Nannie saw everything, that night, in the colour of the rose. To begin with, just as they were starting for the Tube, Pill Tee arrived in a taxi. He could not accompany them, owing to his own engagement at another hall with Perth, but the kind-hearted fellow was determined to do everything in his power to add to Nannie's comfort and pleasure.

He presented her with a spray of roses and maidenhair fern, invented a message of good wishes from Perth, and paid for the taxi to take them to the hall. The silent aunt remained at home. She never cared to go to a theatre or music hall.

Nannie and her mother, unaccustomed to cabs, thoroughly enjoyed the drive. They found it most exciting. The streets were so bright and busy, and it was delightful to belong to the crowd of pleasure-seekers in all the other taxis and private carriages.

When they stopped at last, at the entrance of the music hall, Nannie was dazzled by its flashing lights and gaudy posters. A big man, in chocolate-coloured livery, pushed open the swing door, admitting them to a carpeted vestibule, where a very red-faced gentleman in evening dress, with his silk hat tilted on one side of his head, welcomed their appearance.

with a managerial smile, and passed them on to a young lady in a neat black frock, with a dainty little white bow in her curled and puffed hair.

"Box B—this way, madam, if you please; mind the step," said the young lady, as cordially as if they were her personal friends, and led them up a flight of narrow stairs to the first tier.

There she opened a small door, and they found themselves in the box.

"Prow-grum, threepence, if you please. Thank you, madam," said the young lady, and departed.

The house was full. Nannie, too shy and nervous to stand boldly in the front of the box, sat down in the corner farthest from the stage, and peeped from behind the red silk curtains with which it was draped.

There seemed, to her unaccustomed eyes, to be hundreds of people staring up at her. The orchestra was playing a lively air, accompanied by the whistling of a party of youths in the front row of the gallery.

There was a strong smell in the box of tobacco and spirits, but Nannie did not heed it. She was too absorbed in watching the audience.

She had never seen such a gay, light-hearted, happy crowd. How they would enjoy her father's tricks! How they would laugh at his jokes! How they would applaud his ventriloquism! She thought it was such a fine hall, not quite so large as some of the theatres where Henry Boston had taken her, but excellently adapted
entertainment.

The performance opened

lengthy,

dull turns that one absolutely forgets by the time he reaches the end of the programme. It was followed by a troupe of comic acrobats. Nannie laughed like a child at their antics. She wished that Pill could have seen them, not knowing that any member of the famous Tee Family would have scoffed at their elementary feats of humour and skill.

Mrs. Mordaunt was more critical than her daughter, but she also enjoyed the programme immensely. They applauded every song, and laughed at every joke, however broad or stupid, with the simplicity of ignorance.

"When shall we see dad?" said Nannie again and again.

The star artistes appeared and disappeared. More than half the performance was over. At last, at the very minute when she least expected it, white cards, with the fateful words "Trial Turn," were displayed on each side of the stage.

Nannie turned pale with excitement. The orchestra played a few bars of a jingling tune. The curtain rose on a beautiful scene, so Nannie thought, of a marble hall painted in perspective on the back cloth. There were four gold-backed, cane-bottomed chairs placed round the stage. In the centre stood Professor Mordaunt's two little round tables, with the Professor himself between them, magic wand in hand.

Nannie's loving eyes grew dim, in spite of her pride and confidence. He looked so small and lonely, all by himself, facing the bright, noisy audience.

There was some applause, but the majority of the people were indifferent to trial turns.

Professor Mordaunt began well, although his voice sounded thin and weak, and he was obviously very nervous. His first trick, the disappearance of a handkerchief, did not astonish the audience in the way it astonished his personal friends. Audiences take these wonderful things, Nannie discovered, as a matter of course. His first joke met with an equally cold reception. It was such an old joke that they ought to have given it a kinder greeting.

"What's the matter with your dad? He's so slow!" exclaimed Mrs. Mordaunt.

The girl did not answer. She clenched her hands firmly together and leaned over the front of the box, her eyes fixed on the solitary figure on the stage.

The feeble patter did not raise a single laugh. Somebody in the pit shouted "Speak up!"

The Professor made an effort to obey, forgot his lines for a minute, and cast a helpless glance to the stage manager standing in the wings. The stage manager could only shrug his shoulders and curse, not for the first time, the folly of allowing trial turns.

The Professor lost his nerve—fatal to a conjurer—and began to bungle. First he dropped his wand, then he backed against one of the little tables, and only just saved it from overturning. The man who had told him to speak up now advised him to look out. A boy in the gallery whistled.

The Professor made a desperate effort to recover lost ground. Nannie saw how his hands were shaking; his voice grew loud and shrill; he had picked up the thread of his speech and went on talking mechanically.

For a minute he held the audience at bay, as it were, by the sheer force of his misery, then—suddenly, with a loud crash—a glass bowl full of water fell on the floor behind him.

A second's silence was followed by a roar of laughter. His best trick, the grand old trick of his youth, was spoilt!

His face was like a mask of despair. He could not utter a single word. His big, protruding eyes stared at the broken glass, pool of water, and stranded goldfish. Never before, in the whole history of legerdemain, had a conjurer so disgraced his calling.

"Come off, you *blank* fool!"

It was the stage manager who spoke, but the Professor did not hear him. He turned towards the audience and tried to laugh. Then he made a clutch at the sheet that covered his dolls, placed in a row behind the little tables, ready for the second part of his performance.

He dragged one of them—the leering old woman—into view, and held it out at arm's length.

"Ladies—gentlemen—with your kind permission——" He almost shrieked the opening words of his speech.

"Shut up!"

"Take it orf!"

"Nex' turn!"

Hiss—hiss—hiss.

The footlights seemed to leap into the air—the whole audience seemed to be surging towards him—he stretched out his arms to keep them off—and the curtain fell.

"Help him off, one of you! Don't stand there gaping! Get him a drop of brandy," said the stage manager. "Wipe up that *blank* water—pick up those *blank* fish. Right you are! No. 8 there! Ready? Clear, boys!"

The trial turn was over. Professor Mordaunt had failed.

Nannie, crouching in her chair behind the side curtain of the box, suddenly saw the stage, her father himself, the whole theatre with new eyes. It was as if the veil of illusion had been withdrawn.

She saw the performance for what it was, vapid and vulgar; she shrank from the coarse and senseless laughter; she was faint with the stale and reeking air; she knew that her father had meanly failed in a mean ambition. There was the sting and the pathos.

There is much to be gained in a noble failure, but the poor defeat of a petty soul—the loss of a victory that was not worth the winning—where is one to find consolation and pride? What could she say to her father? She longed for Henry Rostron. He would have understood the sudden change in her outlook and advised her what to do. The faith of her childhood was gone. She saw that Perth was right, but Perth did not love their father.

A hand on her shoulder and a cheery voice in her ear recalled Nannie to herself. Pill Tee had hurried away from the hall where he was performing, directly after his turn, but had not arrived in time to see the Professor. He had found Mrs. Mordaunt in tears. A friend, whom he happened to meet going in, had given him a highly coloured version of the end of the trial turn.

"Don't you be so upset, little woman!" said Pill, sitting down by Nannie and putting his arm round her. "Of all the rotten halls round about London, this is the rottenest! Your dad was too good for 'em. He was too refined."

"It's very kind of you to talk like this, Pill," said Nannie, gently, "but I'm afraid it isn't true. Tell me, honestly, what is your real opinion of father's work?"

"Oh, it's tip-top! Quiet, you know, but first-class!"

Nannie shook her head and looked him in the eyes. The young man laughed and flushed a little.

"Well, your dad's no good!" he blurted out. "I hate to say it, but there's something about you, Nannie dear, that makes a man speak the truth. But don't you be frightened; I'm not going to tell him so. I can lie all right when I'm put to it, just as well as anybody else," he hastened to assure her.

They went round to the stage door for Professor Mordaunt. Pill had a taxi waiting. Mrs. Mordaunt, having recovered from her first disappointment, was more angry than hurt. She attacked

Pill, whose good offices had obtained the trial turn, for not having warned her husband of the style of audience, she was indignant with the Professor for dropping the glass bowl, and she roundly abused the manager, on her way out, for having allowed his colleague behind the scenes to ring down the curtain.

Nannie saw how the men, lounging about the stage door, nudged and winked at one another as Professor Mordaunt came out. It is not often that a man makes such a successful failure.

The Professor's hat was pulled down over his face. He did not speak a word, but squeezed himself into a corner of the back seat and sat motionless, staring out of the window.

Pill was invaluable. He talked without stopping, not only in the taxi, but when they reached Colet Street. The silent aunt had prepared a nice little supper in honour, as she hoped, of a big success.

Mrs. Mordaunt told her the truth in a loud, unflinching voice. The Professor added grim details. He had recovered his voice and described in wild, exaggerated words all that had happened behind the scenes.

Nannie watched him anxiously; he ate and drank with feverish haste, laughed immoderately at Pill's jokes, quarrelled with his wife, and feigned to make light of the whole affair.

After supper, when their guest would have said good night, the Professor brought out the brandy and cigars and would not hear of his going away. It was never difficult to keep Pill. He pulled off

his overcoat again at the first hint of an invitation, filled his glass, lighted up, and launched at once into anecdotes of the Tee Family.

Mrs. Mordaunt and the silent aunt went to bed, but Nannie, although she retired to her own room, did not undress. She left her door open and listened, for hours as it seemed to her, to the voices of the men downstairs. She frequently heard her father's loud, shrill laugh. It grated on her ears.

At last she heard Pill go away. The door was closed and bolted behind him. Then she expected to hear the Professor's step on the stairs, but he did not come.

After a while she went on to the landing, and hung over the banisters.

There was absolute silence in the house. The light in the passage had been turned out.

Softly and stealthily, candle in hand, Nannie crept downstairs. She pushed open the parlour door leading into the shop, but her father was not there.

A nameless fear swept over her. She hurried, noiselessly, down the remaining stairs to the basement. There was a light in the dining-room, and the sound of laboured breathing. She opened the door and looked in. The nameless fear had grown, in a second, monstrous.

The supper things had all been pushed towards one end of the table. Her father sat at the other end, and spread out in front of him, in a confused heap, were all the torn and worn press notices, programmes, and handbills, from his old scrap-

book. He was eagerly sorting them and smoothing them out.

He glanced up at the sound of the door, and stared at Nannie.

Then he smiled to welcome her, while his fingers twitched and shook among the papers.

"Splendid notices, m' dear—favourite with the press—no need to be ashamed of your father—to-night——"

Nannie put down her candle and stooped over the table.

"Oh, my daddy!" she said.

He looked at her silently, almost angrily, for a minute, then, covering his face with his shaking hands, burst into tears.

She drew her arms round his neck, murmuring words of tender sympathy, and he leaned against her, crying like a beaten child.

CHAPTER XX

YOUNG Mrs. Challis and Olly 'Ooper were alone in the Bayswater house.

Mr. Challis had been summoned to the Midlands by the sudden illness of one of his many relatives. His wife resented his absence. Why, she argued, did they all depend upon Sydney, when there were numberless other men in the family?

A funeral meant a demand for Sydney as chief mourner; a marriage was incomplete without Sydney to give the bride away—which really meant that he formally accepted the bridegroom as another relative—and no baby in the clan Challis would be properly christened without the presence of, and a present from, Sydney.

"I'm sure your Uncle Tom could die quite comfortably without you!" Rose had exclaimed, when the telegram arrived.

"You're right, my dear," Challis answered. "But who is to take care of Aunt Emma and the girls? Somebody will have to settle their little affairs if poor Uncle Tom goes to his well-earned rest."

So he had departed, leaving a professional friend in charge of the surgery, and his wife and child alone with Olly 'Ooper and the cock.

Rose had written to Eugene Milrake on the day of her husband's departure, refusing to see him until Challis's return. It was a difficult letter to write, as Eugene, for some time, had successfully played the part of disinterested friend, as if the love he had once dared to profess had indeed changed.

His attitude pleased her; her conscience was at rest; she even blamed herself, as a woman is so ready to do, for the thoughts and feelings that he had awakened and disclaimed.

He had taken her at her word. Mr. Challis had been absent from home for three days—his Uncle Tom, like King Charles II, bade fair to be a long time a-dying—and Rose had not seen or heard from Milrake.

It was Saturday afternoon. The waiting-room was empty of patients, Mr. Challis's friend had gone away, Thomas and the other assistant were making holiday, and Olly 'Ooper was downstairs, overseeing the whitewashing of the scullery by her latest admirer, who happened to be a plumber and decorator.

Rose, with her hands clasped behind her, walked slowly backwards and forwards from the hall door to the window of the surgery. She was unaccountably melancholy and restless. The house was dull and quiet, for Solomon was spending the afternoon with his grandmother.

She missed her husband. It was the first time he had been out of the house, for more than perhaps a couple of hours, since they were married. Rose herself had often been away, but that was

another matter. She was so accustomed to find him close at hand, at any minute, that his absence made her lonely and depressed.

It was true, as she had said to Nannie Mordaunt, they saw little of each other during his working hours, but he was always *there*. She had never realised, she did not fully realise even now, her dependence on that knowledge and all that it meant in the peace and fulfilment of the days of her life.

She thought of Eugene Milrake. He shadowed the growth and development of her complex nature, as a rank weed will shadow a beautiful flower, uplifting its fragile petals to the sun.

If she had not loved him so deeply and so innocently in her girlhood, he would have had no power to move her now; he was bound up in her life; she could no more forget him, or banish him from the past that made the present, than she could forget herself.

The silence and the solitude became intolerable. Rose touched the bell to summon Olly 'Ooper.

"I am going to fetch Solomon," she said, when Olly, after several tinkles, appeared upon the scene. "It is so dull without him."

Olly approved.

"Old Sol would enjoy the whitewashing, ma'am," she replied. "He's never so happy as when there's a workman in the house. Mr. Jollson would teach him to handle his brushes."

When Rose arrived at the house where her mother-in-law lived, where every leaf in the front garden seemed to have been polished by hand, she

found Mrs. Challis had a little tea-party. There were two elderly ladies and Solomon.

The furniture, covered with woolwork, which Rose had gladly resigned to old Mrs. Challis, was displayed in all its gaudy brightness. Each of the older guests was supplied with a big table napkin to spread over her knees to catch stray crumbs, while the little boy's stool was placed in the centre of an outspread newspaper, where he ate and drank all by himself, like a small savage on an island.

Mrs. Challis greeted her daughter-in-law without enthusiasm. There was no love lost between them, but the old lady idolised Solomon, whom she always mentioned, even before his mother, as "poor Sydney's boy," as if he were her son's exclusive property.

Old Sol, with his mug firmly grasped in one hand and a bun in the other, stared at his mother with wide open eyes.

"A noo dress!" he exclaimed.

Rose laughed, and stooped down to kiss him. She had put on her new dress on purpose to annoy her mother-in-law, but she had not expected her son to emphasise the fact.

"It is very becoming, Rose," said old Mrs. Challis. "A most lady-like gown."

Her voice, for once, was kind and sincere, and her eyes showed critical approval. Rose was ashamed of herself. She sat down beside the old lady and joined in the conversation.

She could never be long in her mother-in-law's society without admiring her husband's patience.

How weary he must have grown, in all the years they had lived together, of old Mrs. Challis's talk and her woolwork.

After tea Solomon, to his mother's surprise, was asked to "say his piece." It appeared that old Mrs. Challis had taught him a little poem which she had discovered in a book called "Temperance Verses for the Young." It was a very objectional little poem, and Solomon recited it with great unction, rolling his eyes from one elderly lady to another:—

"Little drops of brandy,
Little sips of rye,
Make the mighty toper,
An' the watery eye!"

At this point Rose burst out laughing. She apologised afterwards to Mrs. Challis.

"I hope it is not the sentiment that amuses you, my dear?" said the old lady.

"Oh, no, mama!" exclaimed her daughter-in-law. "But I hope you are not going to teach Old Sol all the verses in the book. They are not pretty and he doesn't understand them. I am sure Sydney would agree with me."

"Poor Sydney is never sufficiently serious on the temperance question," observed old Mrs. Challis.

"He is one of the most temperate men in the world," said Rose.

She was in a strange mood. The slightest disparagement of her husband made her irritable.

She had often criticised his apparent indifference to many subjects, but it was slowly dawning upon

her mind that he had known, thought out, and passed beyond the consideration of topics that still possessed the whole attention of more limited men and women.

She was absorbed in such thoughts as these, all centred in the growth of her knowledge of her husband, when she left old Mrs. Chall's house. The little boy held her hand. He was tired, but talkative. She answered him at random, smiling approval now and again of his long, disconnected account of the treasures his grandmother had shown him.

Rose was conscious of that strange, undefined anxiety that is supposed to foretell misfortune. Every one has experienced such a sensation ; it is called a premonition of evil, but whence it comes and how near it approaches to the truth is yet a mystery to be solved.

When they were within sight of their own house, Old Sol having relapsed into silence, she was so strongly affected by this sense of unknown calamity that even her cheek paled and she almost dreaded to open the door. It was absurd ! Superstitious ! She was ashamed of her own foolishness and thrust the key into the lock with a steady hand.

" Rose ! "

Her own name, spoken in that voice that she least expected to hear, the voice she had forgotten for a few short hours, made her start and turn.

It was as if her inexplicable fears had taken shape and called her away from her home as she stood on the very threshold. Again—what an absurd thought ! Again—how superstitious !

There was nothing alarming or calamitous in the appearance of Eugene Milrake. He looked particularly well—alert, bright-eyed, gay, self-possessed.

"How are you, Rose? What an age since we met! Mr. Challis still away?" he said, standing with his foot on the step, his hand outstretched.

Rose shook hands, but did not ask him to enter the house. She opened the door with her key and Solomon ran in, shouting to Olly.

"Yes, Mr. Challis is still away," she answered.

"I hope you have had better news of his uncle?"

Rose smiled. Eugene's tone implied such polite, conventional interest in Mr. Challis's uncle, whom he had never seen.

"I hope for better news, but it is very discouraging up-to-date."

"I am sorry."

"Thank you."

They both smiled. Eugene took a step nearer, but still she did not invite him to go in.

"Well, I received your letter," he said.

She turned her eyes on him curiously, half expecting that he would reproach her, or even be angry, for her lack of hospitality. His smile changed into a laugh he could not control.

Rose was surprised. Of all emotions she had expected her letter to arouse in Eugene, mirth was the most unaccountable. She was slightly piqued, and showed it.

"I am glad you found my letter amusing, Eugene."

"Most amusing!"

He laughed again, leaning one hand on the little

balustrade, covered with Virginia creeper, and looking up at her with boyish mockery in his fresh-coloured face.

"Will you tell me the reason?"

He was silent for a minute, became serious, and looked up and down the road as if in search of a suitable answer, or perhaps a possibility of changing the subject.

"To be frank, it was so very unnecessary, Rose," then he answered, slowly.

"You were not coming to see me in any case?" she asked him, eagerly.

"You misunderstand me!" was his quick retort; "Of course I was coming to see you—why not? When I said your letter was unnecessary, I meant"—he paused again, seeming to carefully choose his words, "I meant—I alluded to the words between the lines."

"I did not intend you to read anything between the lines."

"Now, Rose!"

He shook his finger at her, laughing again. There was a subtle stab to her pride and vanity in his perfect comprehension of the banishment she had only hinted. She was seeing Eugene in a new light. It was a glaring light that showed his conceit and how she had flattered him. She hastened to retrieve the false step.

"I only asked you to keep away, Eugene, because I have found, from experience, that you cannot control yourself. You have often annoyed me. You occasionally bore me. I like you very much, as you know, but at a distance."

The words were bold, for when men and women are fighting their eternal duel there is many a keen thrust as well as artful feint. He felt the prick, but parried skillfully.

"Exactly! I appreciate what you say, but I can't think you were serious, Rose. I can't believe—no! I can't believe that you are afraid of me."

"Afraid of you? My dear Eugene, how preposterous!"

It was his turn to laugh. He looked at her with unchanged assurance. She had given the answer expected—pat, like an actress to her cue.

"Then why do you forbid me to enter your house?" said Eugene, slowly, to give the words full weight. "Why do you suddenly throw me off? What have I done? Be fair now! Be just!"

His straight attack confused her. She could not forget her letter. How ridiculous it seemed, seen from the standpoint of Eugene's indignation.

"You accuse me of loss of self-control," he went on. "My dear Rose, don't be reminiscent. Don't be sentimental! You surely know me well enough to believe that I would do anything in the world to be worthy of your confidence and trust."

His voice shook. He moved his hand as if he would have touched her, but clenched it again on the little balustrade.

"Dear Rose," he said, "for the sake of our old love and our new friendship, for the sake of the past as much as the present, don't insult me by your fear or pain me by your distrust. Should I speak to you like this, with absolute freedom from all restraint, if I were not sure of myself—master of myself?"

Rose looked into his eager face and down at his clenched hand. She did not speak.

"After all, what am I asking you to do?" he went on, with less vehemence. "I am asking you, in plain words, to wipe out that letter, the written lines and between the lines. That's all. We're making a mountain out of a mole-hill. Does that sentence jar upon you? I like it. It brings us down to common sense. When may I come to see you?"

"I don't think I want you to come at all, Eugene."

He gave an exclamation of impatience. There was a minute's silence.

"I want to talk to you!" he said, appealingly. "You shall choose all the subjects yourself. I'll talk to order. I'll be good!"

Still she hesitated, fidgeting with the handle of the door, although his foolish words made her smile.

"I'm awfully lonely, Rose."

She looked at him compassionately.

"I can't help that, Eugene."

"No, but you can give me an hour, at least, of ordinary, happy home life. Why not? Let me come to see you to-morrow. I am sure Mr. Challis would not object——"

"My husband never objects to anything I choose to do!" she interrupted, proudly; "yes, you may come to-morrow afternoon. I will be very pleased to see you."

Their hands touched, and Rose went into the house.

Eugene Milrake walked away with a light step, but after a few minutes his elation died away. He was suddenly depressed and dissatisfied.

His love for Rose Challis had never given him a really happy hour.

Vividly as her beauty glowed in his sensuous recollection, haunt him as she did, he was always conscious of the subtle feeling of repulsion that intermingled with the fatal attraction they possessed for each other.

He knew, in his secret heart, that the road he sought to tread—the old primrose way—would end in bitterness and regret; but he could not turn aside. He was the slave of his own weakness, and mastered by the light habits of an ill-spent life.

Rose, when she shut the door upon Eugene Milrake, called to Solomon, whom she heard in the distance talking to Olly 'Ooper.

The little boy ran to meet her. She took his hand and led him up to her room. Then she sat down by the window and pulled his own little arm-chair beside her own.

"I want you to sit down here, Solly, and tell me a story. I am so tired, my darling," she said. "Tell me a long, long story, 'once upon a time——'"

"'Once upon a time,'" repeated Solomon, and straightway began his story.

Still holding one of his hands, she stooped down and laid her cheek against his head.

Twilight faded and the room grew dark.

The child meandered on, and his mother held his little hand against her breast and moved her lips, now and again, to kiss his soft hair.

CHAPTER XXI

IT was Sunday evening. The pearl stringer and her friend, Henry Rostron, were walking together along the towing path by the river. The water was at high tide, splashed and barred towards the west with light from the setting sun ; dark and sombre in the east.

It was the end of one of the most eventful days in Nannie Mordaunt's life.

Sad, happy, blessed day !

They had left Colet Street in the morning, and Rostron had taken her, for the first time, to his chambers in the Adelphi. It was like an enchanted palace to the girl ; a wondrous place, associated with the life and thoughts of her friend.

She had never seen such a beautiful room ; at first it struck her as bare and cheerless, but after a while the rich colour of the green walls, the quantity of books, the few pictures, the old oak panels, the glowing fire of pine cones—everything she saw gave her pleasure and a sense of ease.

She knew of this room from Mr. Challis, but it was the little study, overlooking the roofs towards the Thames, that she longed to see, for there hung the portrait of Rostron's wife.

Did he mean to show it to her? Would she dare to ask him?

Nannie was shy and self-conscious at first in her strange surroundings, but his kindness quickly restored her usual serenity. Her pale face was flushed and her eyes shone.

His tact spared her nervousness; she was not embarrassed by the presence of a servant at lunch; the subjects he chose were easy to understand; the treasures he showed her each had its little story.

There was a gleaming cabinet of mother-o'-pearl in one corner of the room. It attracted and held her admiring eyes.

"Ah! You are looking at my pretty box?" said Rostron; "I might have known that a little pearl stringer would find it out."

The cabinet, shimmering and shining in its pale iridescence, was over five feet in height, delicately made, with silver fittings.

Rostron, after a minute's hesitation, unfastened a little key from his watch chain and fitted it in the silver lock.

"I haven't opened this cabinet for months and months, Anie," he said.

The door slid open, showing the fine workmanship within; there were long shelves, a line of pigeon-holes, and several smaller cabinets, all of mother-o'-pearl.

"The same key fits every lock," said Rostron. "The man who made it was a master of his craft."

The dry, sweet scent of lavender came out of

the cabinet, like a wave of incense. One of the shelves was filled with small books, bound in different coloured velvets; another, with an odd collection of little toys; a third, with quaint scent bottles and a set of ivory chessmen; there were three or four packets of old letters in the pigeon-holes; the smaller cabinets had been used as jewel cases, or to hold fans, gloves, laces, and filmy handkerchiefs.

"This cabinet belonged to my late wife," said Henry Rostron. "It remains exactly as she left it."

Nannie did not speak. He took out one of the little velvet-covered books, and untied the faded silk cord that was fastened round it. Nannie read on the flyleaf, as he held it towards her, in an undeveloped schoolgirl's hand, the words: "Evelyn to Harry," followed by a date of long ago.

"She used to bind these little books for me to carry in my pocket when she was quite a child," said Rostron. "They are all poetry. This is the 'Faerie Queen'; here is Shelley, and Keats, and Wordsworth; George Herbert, Shakespeare's Sonnets; all the poets she knew I read."

He put away the little book and took out an ebony box, inlaid with gold.

"This is her ring-box," he said. "I gave it to her on her sixteenth birthday."

He opened the lid and showed five small rings of little worth, carefully fitted into slits of white velvet.

"These belonged to the days of her childhood, Anie. She left all her jewellery of value to her

sisters and friends. Look at the fans and ivory chessmen. They were her greatest treasures. Chess was the one game that we both loved."

"Are those her toys?" asked the pearl stringer.

Rostron closed and locked the door of the cabinet before he answered.

"No, Anie; the toys belonged to our children. My wife and the two little ones died in India, of cholera. I left them one Sunday morning strong and well, and when I returned to our home, four days afterwards, they were all gone."

An exclamation of horror broke from Nannie's lips. Rostron looked into her eyes, brimming with tears; his own were unspeakably sad, weary, patient—the eyes of a man who bears his cross and hides his wounds.

Then he turned quickly away. She stood still, where he had left her by the cabinet, with her hands clasped to her heart, utterly forgetful of self, all her deep love merged in compassion.

Rostron, with bowed head, remained silent for several minutes, looking down into the fire.

The girl who watched him never forgot the absolute and solemn silence that filled the room, as if the tender memories of his past life were crowding round them.

Then he slowly turned towards her, and at his movement the impression was gone. She noticed again the noise of the street through the open window; the fir cones crackled and jetted little dancing flames of colour; a clock in a distant room struck the passing hour.

"Forgive me, dear Anie, for darkening your

bright holiday with these sad recollections," said Rostron. "If you were not so sweet and sympathetic I should never have opened the cabinet, or spoken of the death of my poor young wife."

Nannie did not answer him. She could not have controlled her tears if she had spoken. She sat down in the chair he pushed forward to the hearth, her hands, still clasped tightly together, resting on her knees.

"All this happened so long ago, even the memory is so interwoven with my youth and work in India," he continued, "that I seem, at times, to have lived two entirely different lives, or rather to have known with extraordinary intimacy the experiences and troubles of another man. The Henry Rostron of those days was as unlike the Henry Rostron of these—in temperament, in mind, in hope, in ideas—as I am physically unlike the boy that I was at twenty."

"I wish I had known you then," said Nannie, softly.

"My dear girl, that would have been impossible," he replied, in his usual voice and manner. "Do you know that I have just passed into the second half of my century, and you—how old are you, Anie—twenty-two? Twenty-three?"

"I am in my twenty-ninth year, Mr. Rostron."

"So old?" he exclaimed, smiling at her. "You are at the very best time of all, according to that wise and delightful philosopher, George du Maurier. Twenty-eight, he declares in one of his books, is the ideal age. Personally, I think all the ages of men and women are equally interesting and important, like the ages of nations."

"Then why do you always talk as if you were quite an old man?" said Nannie.

"There you strike home, Anie," said Rostron, smiling again. "I preach, but I do not practise. I feel like an old man—tired out, worn out. It's very good of you, Anie, to bear so patiently with an old and melancholy man like me. Do you realise that? We have had some very jolly days together, haven't we? The poets, and the lovers, and the writers of romance haven't got it all their own way, have they? We friends know a few of their radiant secrets."

He laughed whimsically, then looked at his watch.

"Anie! do you know the time?" he asked, turning the face for her to see. "Are we going to discover Richmond Park this afternoon or to-morrow morning?"

Nannie put on her hat slowly, standing in front of a circular mirror that framed in miniature the room she was to remember all the rest of her life—the green and brown of walls and floor, the shelves of books, the bowls of flowers, the beautiful cabinet of mother-o'-pearl.

She stood in the narrow entrance-hall a minute, while Rostron spoke to his servant, and glanced through a half-open door into the little study overlooking the roofs towards the river.

There, upon the wall, half in shade, hung the portrait she yearned to see. The vivid colour of the dress and background made it shine like a patch of marigolds in the dim light. It was a full-length figure, straight and slim; the head, with its coil of dark hair, was turned to one side,

showing the curve of a lovely throat ; in her arms she held a sheaf of tiger-lilies, and her gold-embroidered dress was jewelled across the breast with a broad band of precious stones.

The work of a famous painter, perhaps the most brilliant, certainly the most beloved of all the great Victorian painters, it seemed to breathe the life of beauty, pride and youth, gorgeous and daring in conception, masterly and exquisite in accomplishment.

The face looked illusive and pale in the half light, so that the pearl stringer could not see it well, but she gained an impression of small features, accentuated by the dark brows and great coil of black hair.

When Rostron joined her he closed the study door, without a word of the portrait, and led the way downstairs.

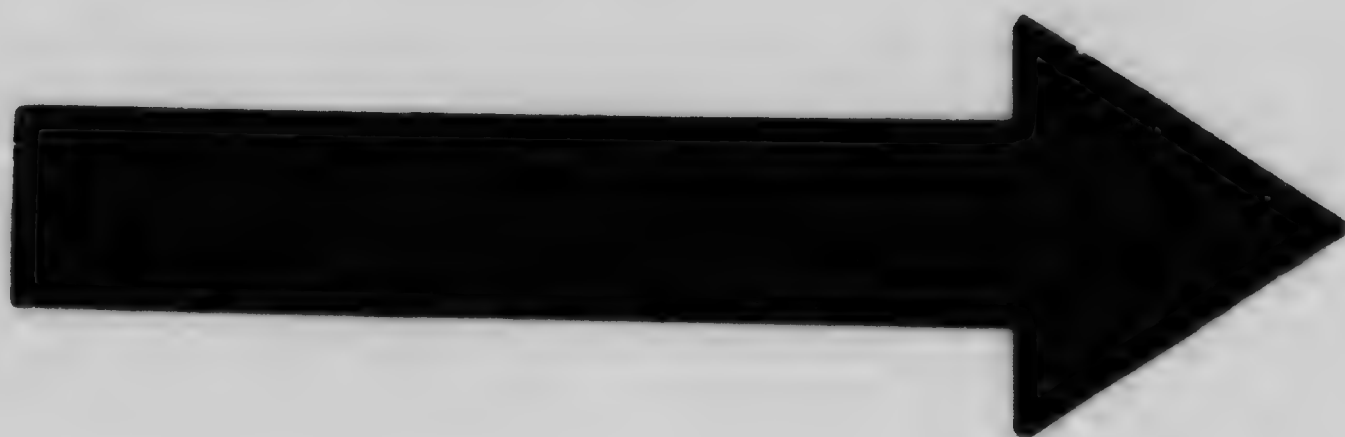
"I am afraid your first visit has been rather dull, Anie," he said, turning up his face to look at her as she followed him. "I must make the next more entertaining."

"Are you going to invite me to come again?" asked Nannie, simply.

"Of course I am! I have so many things to show you, and so much to tell you. You won't get rid of your old friend, my child, until you introduce him to a new one. That is bound to happen one day, and then—exit poor Kalippo!"

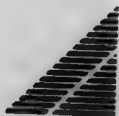
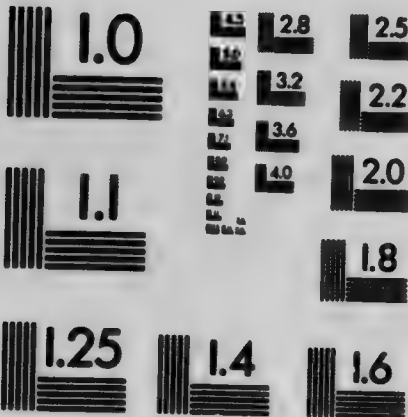
He laughed as the door closed behind them, but Nannie looked unhappy.

"Why should I say good-bye to Kalippo because I make a new friend, Mr. Rostron?"



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"Because the new friend will take possession of all your spare time. You'll find you have so much to say to each other. Never mind, I'll slip in for a chat now and then, when you're hard at work pearl stringing, and on the happy day you shall give me a buttonhole out of your bouquet to console me for the loss of my little Anie."

"What do you mean by the happy day?" said Nannie.

"When you will appear in white satin and orange blossoms, and we shall all have our pockets full of rice and confetti to throw after you."

"I understand."

Rostron noticed the faint blush that tinted her face, and said no more. It occurred to him that he had, by his light words, inadvertently awakened a sad thought, or a lost hope, in the gentle girl.

They went to Richmond Park, and wandered from the roads and footpaths into the long grass and wilderness of bracken.

Rostron, always a man of moods, talked to her gaily and intimately of his everyday life, the interests, amusements, opinions of a social world that was strange and unknown to Nannie Mordaunt. There was some cynicism and scorn in his word-pictures, but more good-natured tolerance and amusement.

He had many acquaintances, few friends; distinguished names that Nannie often saw in the newspapers dropped familiarly into his talk now and then, but he seemed to stand mentally aloof

from the crowd, even while he joined in its works of pleasure and pleasurable works.

Not a little of his loneliness was the result of his detachment from all the associations and associates of his professional career.

Henry Rostron of the past was an utterly different man, as he had said, from Henry Rostron of the present. It seemed to Nannie, her intuition quickened by her intense interest in everything he did or said, that he had deliberately severed every possible tie that bound him to the tragedy of his early life and the thwarted ambition of his middle age.

Every hour of that day, the last they were to spend together, lived in the pearl stringer's memory through all the chances and changes of her after-life.

She loved, ever after, the fresh, chilly wind of passing summer, the clean smell of mould and bracken, and the golden-brown tints of the rustling trees. She loved the wide stretches of Richmond Park, the soft-eyed deer, the twittering birds, the shy, fleet squirrels, the murmur and the silence in earth and air. She loved the winding river, as night drew near, the passing boats, the flash and flicker of distant lamps. She loved the gathering darkness, like a veil dropping over the land, and the mystery of the dark waters flowing towards the sea.

"I wish this evening could last for ever!" said Nannie, as they strolled along the towing-path, their faces turned towards the city.

She spoke as frankly as a child, laying her hand

upon his arm, as if she would entreat him to linger.

"How easy it is to please you, Anie!" he exclaimed, smiling down at her upturned, shadowy face.

"I like to work," she said, quickly. "I am perfectly happy at home, but here, and now, I feel like a different being. What a difference your friendship has made in my life, Mr. Rostron. I know how dull it has been for you, at our house, but you have taught me so much—opened my eyes—made me think! You see, I can't express what I mean."

She broke off abruptly, turning her head away.

"My dear little girl!" said Rostron affectionately.

"You have taken such an interest in Perth, and you were so kind when I told you of poor dad's failure," Nannie went on. "You have shown me such curious sights, and given me so many books. My aunt, who is so quiet and cool about everything, thinks you are a wonderful man."

Rostron laughed. He was the last man in the world to consider himself wonderful.

"I wish I could have added a little to your happiness, as you have added to mine," said Nannie. "But what can I do? Nothing! I'm only a poor working girl."

"You string pearls, Anie," he answered. "Your work is typical of yourself; but the pearls I speak of are gentle thoughts, sweet words, generous deeds."

"Oh, Mr. Rostron, I can't bear your praise!"

"You must!" he said. "The scattered hours I have spent with you are pearls on the thread of life."

He paused a moment, smiling at his own words.

"The scattered hours I have spent with you are pearls on the thread of life," he repeated. "That's very fantastic, isn't it, Anie? But it expresses the quality of our affection. It is restful, helpful, with no disturbing element. Perhaps it takes a man of my age and sad experience, and a girl of your sympathetic and sweet nature, to prove the possibility of such a friendship."

Nannie assented in a low voice. Her face was turned towards the gently flowing, darkling river, and her thoughts followed its course far from the crowded banks and noise of the city to the quiet meadows and the rippling streams.

"The scattered hours I have spent with you are pearls on the thread of life."

His words echoed in her brain like a phrase of familiar music. She could not forget them. She saw the gleam and the shimmer of pearls—symbols of purity and beauty—slipping together on a silver thread, and she knew they were symbols of the scattered hours.

Rostron took her home to Colet Street. He was gay at their parting.

"I will see you again in a few weeks," he said. "I am leaving London to-morrow morning."

"Are you going abroad again?" she asked.

"No such good fortune!" he answered. "I am going to motor to Cornwall with my brother."

Take care of yourself, small person, and don't forget me."

His thin, sensitive hand held hers—she would have known its touch from all others in the world—and she looked into his kind eyes for a minute, then he turned away from the door, and Nannie was alone.

CHAPTER XXII

NANNIE MORDAUNT, after her parting with Rostron, would gladly have gone to the quietude of her own room, but that was impossible. Perth and his partner were supping with the family, and she was obliged to join them.

Her father's smile of welcome was a compensation. She sat down beside him. Professor Mordaunt was slowly recovering from the shock of his failure, but he looked more shrunken than of yore, while his protruding eyes and wiry moustache seemed to have grown bigger.

Mr. Pill Tee, as usual, was in overwhelmingly good spirits. Belle, the hideous bulldog, greeted Nannie with lumbering affection. Perth's face cleared at her entrance—he was in one of his sulky fits—and the silent aunt seized the opportunity to slip out of the room for half an hour's reading.

"I saw your little friend with the dark hair this afternoon, Nan," said Pill, after a while; "she was in Hyde Park, under the trees, with her kiddy and a man."

"Do you mean Mrs. Challis, Pill?" asked the pearl stringer.

"That's right, the lovely Rose," said Pill. "Hasn't she got a pair of eyes! By Jove! a feller could drop into 'em and be drowned. Shouldn't mind it myself. She always reminds me of a little girl I knew who did a trapeze act." Pill stopped for a second to pay the tribute of a loud sigh to the memory of his first love, and then resumed in a cheerful voice: "This little girl had the most amazing eyelashes—long, black, and curly. A feller got tangled up in 'em and couldn't escape. One night we had a bit of a row over a chap in the Strong Man line. There was an all-round shindy, and we parted for ever."

He paused again to sigh and thump his chest.

"Is that the end of the story of the young woman with the wonderful eyelashes?" asked Perth irritably.

"No, my boy, it isn't, not by a long shot," said Pill. "A few months afterwards I met the Strong Man again, and we made up our quarrel. She had given him the chuck, in the end, for a tank artiste. They're always in the end, you know (that's a joke, Nan!). But the Strong Man had had his revenge. He wasn't like me. I *can't* be angry with a girl. He had sneaked into her dressing-room one night, when she wasn't there, and stolen her eyelashes—a whole box of 'em! It was a shabby trick. I couldn't treat a woman like that!"

When Pill had recovered from his indignation at the conduct of the Strong Man, Nannie questioned him farther about her friend.

"Did you say that Solomon, the little boy, was with Mrs. Challis?"

"Yes. Fine little chap! He recognised me and Belle directly we came along. They were sitting under the trees. Mrs. Challis introduced me to the man—Mr. Milrake. Good-lookin' chap. We had a jolly talk. At least, I seemed to do all the talking. It strikes me, now I come to think it over, that two was company and three was none, leaving out Belle and the kid. I believe they wanted to get rid of me!"

Perth gave a disagreeable laugh.

"No doubt Mrs. Challis and Milrake could have got on very well without you, my dear Pill," he said.

Nannie looked at her brother curiously. What did he mean? She suddenly remembered the evening in the Cancan Restaurant, when she had seen Rose and Milrake together, and her own peculiar sensation of distrust and anxiety.

She rose as soon as supper was over, and made an excuse to leave the room.

She felt that it was unreasonable and absurd, but the light words of Perth had revived her half-forgotten feeling of the night at the Cancan. She ran upstairs to the workroom behind the shop, where the silent aunt was reading.

"Aunt!" said Nannie, closing the door behind her, "I know you'll think it's very silly, after I've been out all day, but I'm going to see Rose Challis."

"Isn't it rather late, dearie?" asked Miss Grey, carefully marking the place in her book with a slip of paper before she answered.

"It's only half-past nine," said Nannie. "I shall

get there by ten o'clock. Indeed, dear aunt, indeed I must go! I wish you'd tell dad and mother. I know they'll think I'm ridiculous, but they wouldn't understand, even if I tried to explain, that I am impelled to go."

"Very well, Nannie! Do as you like, my dear," said the quiet aunt, and she opened her book to go on reading.

As the girl went out of the house into the quiet street, where she had so recently parted from Henry Rostron, she seemed to hear his voice:

"The scattered hours I have spent with you are pearls on the thread of life."

The wind had dropped. It was a quiet, moonlit night.

Definite and determined as Nannie proved herself to be in the time that followed, she could have given no serious reason for her flight to Rose. She was influenced by no base suspicion of her friend, or even of Eugene Milrake. Her instinct was quicker than her mind, and she obeyed its instinct.

There were lights in the house at Bayswater. The blinds of the dining-room were pulled down, but she saw the shadow of a woman's figure moving backwards and forwards, with different objects in the hands. It was Olly 'Ooper, no doubt, carrying away the supper dishes.

Nannie knew that Rose usually sat in her own little sewing-room when Mr. Challis was not at home; it was a mere slip of a room, with one small window overlooking the garden.

The pearl stringer often made her way down

the narrow passage at the side of the house, and tapped at the window of this little room to summon her friend to the side door. It was a pleasant, intimate way of gaining admission, and she determined to do so now. If Rose were not in her little sewing-room she could go to the front door and ask for her.

The walls of the narrow passage were covered with ivy. It was smooth and cold to her touch in the semi-darkness. She saw there was a light in the window. Moonlight flooded the garden, with its patches of yellow and white daisies, tall hollyhocks, and nodding dahlias.

Nannie found, as she drew nearer, that the curtains were not drawn together. She could look into the room, unseen, from the shelter of the bushes.

She only intended to pause for a minute—her hand was already outstretched to tap upon the pane—when the picture that she saw within the frame of the window made her stop involuntarily, surprised into stillness, unable to speak or move.

Rose and Eugene Milrake were sitting opposite to each other on either side of the little sewing-table. Their hands were clasped across it; they were both leaning forward. Her embroidery had fallen upon the ground, with an overturned work-basket, and several of the bright coloured silk skeins were clinging to her white skirt; the light of the lamp behind the man shone full upon her face, but he was in shadow.

Her expression was so strange and fixed that Nannie Mordaunt shuddered, as if she were looking upon the agony of birth or death; every

feature was drawn and tense, the lips open and colourless, the beautiful eyes staring, the forehead lined and haggard, the cheeks hollowed as if with age.

It was like a mask of Rose Challis's face; all the beauty wiped out; the spirit looking inward upon itself, and appalled by what it saw.

Nannie heard the voice of Eugene, for the lower window was open a few inches, but not the words he spoke. His voice was deep and earnest with suppressed passion—pleading, eloquent, assertive, wretched—the voice of a man who is recklessly sweeping away every barrier of secrecy and reserve between himself and his desire.

Suddenly he drew her nearer, by sheer force, and at the same instant her face changed. The mask was broken into quivering lines, and the quick blood leapt in her veins. She rose to her feet, and dragged away her hands—for a second he held them as she struggled fiercely—and then she threw out her arms with a wild, free gesture, as if she had literally torn herself out of his embrace.

She struck the table with her clenched right hand, a blow that made her shake from head to foot, and poured out a torrent of words.

Eugene Milrake was cowed by the fury of the woman. He shrank away; she had lost, for the minute, all the attraction that alone held him.

He was mean and cringing and afraid, hot and cold in a breath, and looked like a man under the lash, raging and impotent, helpless and degraded.

Nannie Mordaunt hung upon the scene. It had

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rushed upon her so quickly that she had no time to draw back or go forward. She saw that Rose was mistress of herself and of the situation.

She saw the extraordinary change in Eugene. She saw him sink through the door Rose had flung open. She saw her friend, alone in the room, fall down upon her knees by the side of the table, shaken with sobs, wildly weeping.

Then the pearl stringer crept close to the window. She bent, and laid her ear to the sill.

Her first impulse was to comfort Rose; the second to leave her alone—to spare her even the sound of a loving voice and the sight of another's face. There are poignant minutes when all sympathy lies in silence.

She listened to the broken voice.

"Sydney! Sydney!"

Again and again Rose Challis murmured her husband's name as if the very word were a prayer.

An inspiration flashed into the pearl stringer's mind. Her expression was eager and resolute. She looked through the window for one moment longer, and kissed the glass as tenderly as she would have kissed Rose's cheek; then she turned, and hurried down the narrow passage at the side of the house, out into the road, and home to Colet Street.

The silent aunt, still reading in the workroom behind the shop, heard the click of Nannie's key in the lock a few minutes after she had turned the last page of her book.

She greeted the girl's quick entrance with a slight nod.

"Aunt!" exclaimed Nannie, throwing herself into a chair, "I want to tell you a secret. I want you to help me."

"Wait a minute, dearie," interrupted Miss Grey, her finger on the line she was reading.

Nannie waited patiently until her aunt had finished the book, and laid it down upon the table with a sigh of satisfaction and regret.

"I am going on a journey, aunt," said the pearl stringer. "It is rather a long journey, so I must ask you to lend me a little ready money. I'll pay you back next week."

The silent aunt expressed no surprise, beyond raising her eyebrows and making a little, clicking sound with her tongue.

"I don't want to tell you where I am going," Nannie continued, "but you know I can take care of myself, and I shall only miss a day's work."

"Are you starting to-night, my dear?" asked Miss Grey, glancing at the clock.

"No, aunt!" said Nannie, with a smile. "It's past eleven o'clock. I'll be off the first thing in the morning. I shall tell mother and dad I'm going to see Bertha."

Bertha was a friend of Nannie's, living at Brighton, to whom she occasionally paid a short visit.

"I hope you're not doing anything rash, Nan?" said her aunt, after a period of reflection.

"No! I feel that I am doing right."

"You're unaccustomed to travelling alone," said Miss Grey, anxiously.

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"I am not afraid, dear 'aunt. I have set myself a difficult task, but I dare—I dare!"

"Very well, my dear," said the silent aunt.

Nannie little knew it, but she was going to prove the truth of a proverb reversed—"Angels rush in where fools fear to tread!"

CHAPTER XXIII

ROSE CHALLIS, on the following day, did not rise until the morning was far advanced.

She had slept badly ; her head and eyes ached ; she was weary and languid.

She called Solomon into the room when Olly brought her breakfast. The little boy appeared with his paints and drawing-book. His companionship was very restful. Rose, lying back on her pillows, with her dark hair in a thick plait over her shoulder, looked like a child herself, a little girl, singularly young and appealing.

"You love your daddy better than you love me, don't you, Old Sol?" she said, wistfully, watching him at work.

"I love you both," he answered. "I don't love one of you more'n another of you. An' I love Olly, an' Mr. Jollson, an' Bumble, an' my Nannie Mordaunt, an'——"

"You talk and play with daddy much more often than you talk and play with me," she interrupted.

Solomon, perhaps because he could not deny it, preferred not to answer. He glanced at his mother's breakfast tray and changed the subject by quoting Olly :

"Eat your crust, child, it'll make your hair curl."

"Come here!" said Rose.

He came to the side of the bed, holding his paint brush. She looked at him long and earnestly; at the blunt little face, strong and solemn, the bright, thick hair, the firm hands, so like his father's, the sturdy frame—pride and delight in her son swept over her.

The thought passed through her mind, for the first time, of the joy it would be to have a girl too, like and unlike her serious Old Sol:

"As cowslip unto oxlip is,
So seems she to the boy."

It was a tender thought, making her smile very slightly, the brooding smile of mother-love.

Then her mood changed. She ate her breakfast, encouraging Solomon to chatter, packed him off to Olly while she dressed, and, in less than an hour, was on her way to Colet Street.

She hungered for her old friend, Nannie Mor-daunt.

The events of the previous day, every word that had passed between herself and Eugene Milrake, returned to her mind with terrible clearness with the passing away of physical languor.

She had been dull and indifferent on first awaking, amused by the child, only conscious of her own lassitude. But with the healthy exertion of walking in the fresh, nipping air, her usual quickness of perception and keen judgment returned.

Memory refused to be veiled. Everything that had taken place stood out in clear, bold outlines.

There was no sentimentality or morbid self-analysis in her grave, searching thoughts.

She knew that in the judgment of the world she would stand acquitted—a woman who was true to her husband, unswervingly true in deeds. In words? In thought? Ah! There was the bitter, deep stab of remorse; the bitter, deep—but healing—stab of repentance.

Rose found Miss Grey working alone, in the room behind the shop in Colet Street. She was very uncommunicative, as usual. Nannie had gone to Brighton. She would probably return in a couple of days, perhaps much sooner. Professor and Mrs. Mordaunt had much more to say, but to little purpose. It was unlike Nannie to leave home so suddenly.

The Professor was inclined to think she intended following the example of her brother, and would be next heard of as a member of the Tee Family or some other troupe, but Mrs. Mordaunt laughed at the idea, and the silent aunt shook her head decisively.

"Nan will keep to 'the stringing,'" she said. "I kept to 'the stringing' myself. I know!"

Rose Challis was very disappointed. She had had no intention of confiding in Nannie, but she felt that the sound of her friend's voice and the touch of her hands would have soothed and consoled.

She returned to Bayswater in a restless, irritable mood.

The dread of Eugene, exaggerated out of all proportion in the reaction from the stormy

interview of the previous night, began to haunt her. She wondered at her own courage in going to Colet Street, for experience had taught her that his ingenuity in arranging meetings was almost inexhaustible.

She sent for Olly after the early dinner shared with Solomon, to repeat an order given in the morning.

"Olly, I don't want to see Mr. Milrake if he calls to-day, or any other day," she said; "do you understand?"

"I hope I do, ma'am," replied Olly, slightly ruffled.

"I shouldn't be so emphatic if you had obeyed me yesterday," said Rose; "but I told you I was not at home to anybody, except Mrs. Challis and Miss Mordaunt, and then you admitted Mr. Milrake."

"He declared you expected him!" exclaimed Olly.

Rose laughed to hide her anger.

"That was nonsense, Olly. I did not expect him, and I do not wish to see him. I want to be alone with Solomon."

"Nobody couldn't have better company than our Old Sol," observed Olly, as she left the room.

The house had never seemed so : and lonely as it did that afternoon. She talked for half an hour with her husband's friend who was attending to his work, but he was garrulous and argumentative—how different from Mr. Challis!—and bored her with little compliments and puns.

She tried to read, only to throw the book aside ;

playing the piano gave her a happy hour, but she could not sew.

At night, after Solomon had gone to bed, she paced up and down the drawing-room, heedless of the passing of time, trying to recall all the trifling incidents, apparently purposeless words, which had led to her last interview with Eugene Milrake, ending in his violent dismissal.

If it were possible to tell her husband—but she could never tell him—what would he say to her? What would he do?

She realised, for the first time in her life, how terrible it would be to fear him. She thought of his physical strength—the squarely made, firm hands, the roll of the muscles in his powerful arms—and her own feeling of utter helplessness if ever she dared him, in jest, to hold her prisoner.

The hour grew late.

The street and the house were absolutely silent. All the sounds that she heard were her own light footsteps. She was in the back room, staring out into the garden, when the whirl and jar of a taxi, stopping in front of the house, made her start and listen.

She did not doubt, in her sudden and unreasonable agitation, that it was Eugene Milrake. Running out of the room, she hung over the banisters, ashamed to repeat her order to Olly, but determined not to let him cross the threshold.

Olly was already in the hall. She heard the door opened, and the girl give an exclamation of surprise.

Intense relief and gratitude made her heart throb and the tears rush into her eyes.

It was not Eugene. She heard her husband's voice. The dear, familiar, ordinary voice! She leaned still farther over the banisters, and saw him shake hands with Olly, and pull off his hat and overcoat.

Then he looked up the stairs, and saw his wife.

"Ah, there you are!" he exclaimed, and started to meet her.

Olly carried away his bag. Rose ran down and caught him on the first landing. She flung herself into his arms. All her misery, her remorse, her fears, were forgotten in her old—and new—sense of safety, peace, joy!

"All well, my dear? Pleased to see me, eh? How's the boy?"

The simple questions, his surprised, quick response to her wild embrace, his proud way of looking round the room as if he had never seen it before, everything he said and did filled her with happiness and pain.

"Why did you come home so suddenly?" she asked. "Is your uncle better? What does it mean?"

"Poor old Uncle Tom is no better and no worse," answered Mr. Challis. "Aunt Emma and the girls are reconciled, and I couldn't do any good by stopping."

"When did you make up your mind to return?"

"At mid-day."

"Sydney!"

She leaned her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes. It was so inexpressibly restful to feel his arm around her—to know that he was there! She would never tell him of her struggle with Eugene Milrake. It would be cruel, hateful, to shake his blind confidence and shadow his placid life with the knowledge of her weakness and his friend's treachery.

After a while she raised her eyes to his. He was looking down at her very sadly.

"I have some bad news for you, my dear," he said; "it has pained me very much—very much, Rose."

Her thoughts flew to Eugene Milrake.

"Does it concern Eugene?" she said, so softly that he had to stoop his head to hear the words.

"No," he answered, in a quiet voice; "no, it has nothing to do with Milrake. It concerns Henry Rostron. My dear, Henry Rostron is dead."

Rose gave an exclamation of horror and surprise.

"He was killed in a motor smash," Challis went on. "I saw it on the bills of an evening paper at the railway station. It happened in Somerset, somewhere near Bath. The chauffeur seems to have lost control, going down a steep hill, and the car dashed into a stone wall and overturned. Our friend, his brother, and the driver were the only people in the accident. Sir John Rostron was cut and bruised and the man had his arm broken, but Henry Rostron was pinned under the car, and died before they could get him to a hospital."

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Rose hardly listened to such details as Challis could give her. Her heart was aching for Nannie Mordaunt. Poor Nannie! Poor little pearl stringer! Henry Rostron was such a dear friend. Rose did not know how dear.

Pity for her old companion, intense gratitude and happiness for herself—such emotion swept away all the barriers of her self-control.

Without saying a word, weakly and helplessly, she broke into a storm of tears and sought the shelter of her husband's arms.

CHAPTER XXIV

"**T**HE scattered hours I have spent with you are pearls on the thread of life."

Nannie Mordaunt heard these words, echoed in her heart, in the stillness of the long, dark night. She heard them in the grey dawn. She fell asleep as the sky was turning red, over the crowded roofs of this city of tragedy and of woe, and she dreamed of Henry Rostron.

She dreamed vividly of Henry Rostron. He did not speak to her or seem to see her, although she stood very close to him, but kept his eyes on the waving corn—Nannie thought they were in a cornfield—where it dipped and swayed under the soft breeze.

Quantities of poppies and cornflowers edged the wide field; skylarks were singing, unseen, in the pale sky; there was a narrow path, leading to a wood of slender pines, where Rostron walked. He looked very happy, and bright, and well, as she had rarely seen him look, and he held a tuft of white flowers, traveller's joy, between his fingers.

Nannie awakened slowly, as if she were reluctant to return to consciousness. Her head was pillowed on her folded arms. She was stretched at full length on her narrow bed. She had only slept

for two or three hours, but felt refreshed and vigorous.

She remembered her beautiful dream as clearly as if it were a painted picture she looked upon every day.

Henry Rostron was dead. It was so strange, so inexplicable; it had shocked her so terribly, on the previous night, that she could not fully realise the truth.

She repeated the words, under her breath, again and again; sat up and looked at the newspaper that was lying on the floor, where she had dropped it; rose, and leaned on the sill of her window thinking of their last day together.

"The scattered hours I have spent with you are pearls on the thread of life."

How grateful Nannie would have been to lie in her bed, undisturbed and alone, for several quiet hours. Perhaps she might have been able to sleep again; perhaps to dream of the waving corn-field; but she heard her mother go downstairs and the sound of her aunt, sweeping.

Then she remembered that several important orders, from a big shop in Piccadilly, had to be finished and sent home as quickly as possible. She had found her aunt, on returning from her journey on the previous night, hard at work.

Mr. and Mrs. Mordaunt looked at their daughter curiously, as they sat at the breakfast table. She spoke and looked as usual. They consoled themselves with the thought that Mr. Rostron, for all his kindness, was only a stranger. It was not as if Nannie had lost one of her re-

lations, they argued, or a man whom she hoped to marry.

It was a relief when she went upstairs to the workroom, for they were eager to discuss all the details of the accident, recorded in the morning paper.

When Miss Grey joined her niece, taking her accustomed place at the side of the table, she glanced furtively at Nannie. The girl looked tired, but quite calm and self-contained.

"Wouldn't you like to take a day's holiday, after your journey, dearie?" asked the silent aunt.

Nannie looked at her abstractedly. Then shook her head.

"No, dear aunt. I am quite able to work. I would rather work."

There was another long silence.

"I thought everything would remind you, sitting here, of Mr. Rostron," said Miss Grey, gently.

Nannie held her delicate needle poised for a minute, with half a dozen small pearls upon it.

"It doesn't make any difference, aunt. I should be thinking of him, just the same, if I went away from the workroom."

She let the pearls slip from the needle to the silk, then she spoke again.

"It is so strange, aunt! *It is so strange.* He will never be here again—never, never! I keep on expecting to hear him at the door. Where *is* he, aunt? Is he near me? I feel as if he were quite near me."

She turned her face towards the empty chair, where Rostron used to sit, and suddenly stooped

down and laid her face upon its arm. There were no tears in her eyes. After a little while she returned to her former position, and went on with her work.

"It is so strange!" she said once more. "We talked of death, he and I, but I never realised what it meant. It is the loneliness, aunt! It is the long, long years I may have to wait——"

Miss Grey made no answer, beyond touching Nannie's fingers. The girl put down the skein of silk and scissors she was holding, and clasped her hands over her face, but still she did not cry.

"Aunt! Shall we ever meet again? Shall I ever be able to tell him how my heart ached for him? Once he said, but he was only joking, that we should go on living our old life, in imagination, for a thousand years."

A smile, more sad than tears, passed over her face. She seemed to hear the whimsical voice of Rostron. She seemed to see him.

"I try not to lose my faith, aunt," she continued, simply; "I try to say, 'Thy will be done,' but it is so hard. Oh, God! It is so hard!"

Later in the day, when they were again at the work table, Nannie talked of the days they had passed together, she and Rostron, recalling his words, his gestures, his changeable moods; she had forgotten nothing; she described him minutely, all the familiar, characteristic points of his individuality.

Rose Challis went to see her in the evening, but the friends, for once, had little to say to each other. They kissed and parted very soon.

Nannie did not dream that night. She slept the heavy, blank sleep of exhaustion.

On the second morning after her return she rose early. Miss Grey found her in the workroom before breakfast, poring over the newspaper.

"They are going to bury Mr. Rostron this afternoon," said Nannie. "They have brought him to his brother's house in Mayfair."

"Well, well, dearie!" said the quiet aunt.

The girl folded the newspaper neatly, and laid it on the table. She sat still for several minutes, while Miss Grey dusted and arranged the room.

"Aunt!" she exclaimed, with sudden determination, "I must see him. I can't believe, even now, that he is dead. I shall never believe it unless I see him."

"My dear Nan, it is impossible."

Nannie took no notice of Miss Grey's protest. As soon as breakfast was over she dressed herself, very carefully, in a white silk blouse and grey skirt. Rostron had always disliked black. Her coat was also grey, and she wore a plain straw hat. She looked more like a humble bride than a woman who mourned.

She had often been to Lady Rostron's house, to string pearls. It was there she had first met Henry Rostron.

It was not until she reached the end of her short journey, and her hand was on the bell, that Nannie realised the boldness of the thing that she meant to do. It was such a big house, with its drawn blinds, so grand, gloomy, and formidable.

She had never felt nervous, or even very shy,

with her little bag in her hand when she went there on business. But on this occasion she was shaking from head to foot.

When the servant opened the great door he stared at her, remembering her face, but unable to recall where he had seen the pale, frightened-looking young woman.

"Please—I wish to see Lady Rostron, if you please!" said Nannie, stammering and halting over the words.

The man gave a curt, but courteous answer. Lady Rostron was unable to see any one. Nannie did not offer to go away. Her ladyship was unwell, he added, and, dropping his voice, told her there was death in the house. The funeral of Sir John's brother was to take place in the afternoon.

"I really wish to see Lady Rostron. I must see her. It is very important!" said Nannie Mordaunt.

Impressed by her manner, and the last words of the sentence, he admitted her to an entrance hall, and left her alone in a wide alcove, where there was a big fire, a writing-table strewn with papers, and a bronze group of a tigress and her cubs.

Nannie sat down in one of the leather arm-chairs. She saw, in the distance, a quantity of beautiful flowers, purple and white, and a green wreath, twined with black ribbon. Their purpose suddenly struck her. She ought to have brought some flowers herself. He liked flowers, but she had nothing—nothing—to give him.

The servant returned after a little while, and took her into a small room, leading out of the hall,

A young lady, dressed in mourning, stepped forward to meet her. Nannie had expected to see Lady Rostron. She stood still, just within the door, alarmed, and shrinking from a stranger.

"I am Lady Rostron's secretary," said the other, with a voice and manner that suggested careful repression of natural energy in the sad circumstances. "She does not recollect your name, but I shall be glad to know what we can do for you."

Nannie tried to answer, but her mouth was so dry she could not form the words. The secretary looked at her very curiously.

"Perhaps you do not know that there is death in the house." She dropped her voice as the man-servant had done. "Lady Rostron is naturally unwilling to be disturbed, but as your message was so very urgent——"

She stopped, waiting for Nannie to speak.

"I—I know you will think it very strange," said the pearl stringer, "but I want you to allow me—just for a minute—to see——"

She laid her hand on the back of the chair to steady herself. Curiosity in the secretary's face changed to surprise and interest.

"I must see—my friend—Mr. Rostron——" said Nannie, and could say no more.

"But you know, surely you know——" began the secretary.

"Yes, I know."

The secretary stood silent for a minute, looking thoughtfully at the girl.

"I will speak to Lady Rostron," she said, and went out of the room,

When she returned, accompanied by Lady Rostron, Nannie was standing in the same position, waiting.

Lady Rostron, in black, filmy draperies, with her string of perfect pearls round her neck, and her pale, fluffy hair simply, but most carefully, arranged, looked very fragile and pathetic.

She looked at the pearl stringer very much as the secretary had looked at her, and held out her pretty, limp hand.

"My dear Miss"—she hesitated as usual for the right name—"Miss Mordaunt, it is very good of you to come to see me, but I don't understand—I really do not understand the extraordinary request you have made to Miss Beverley."

She glanced at her secretary, and touched her eyes with her handkerchief. "Dearest Hal!" she murmured to herself.

"I implore you to let me see him, Lady Rostron!" said Nannie. "He was so kind to me. We have known each other for years."

"I have heard him speak of you," said Lady Rostron, sinking into a chair and again brushing the ready tears from her eyelashes, "but I didn't know you were really friends. It is so extraordinary. Dear Alice, advise me!"

She fondled her secretary's hand, frowning a little as if to give the cue for her answer. Miss Beverley slightly nodded her head, but did not commit herself to an opinion.

"Frankly, Miss—er—Morley, I do not know whether I ought to grant your request. If only Sir John were here, Alice! My poor brother-in-

law has passed beyond all earthly desires and associations," said Lady Rostron.

She felt that her words were poor and ineffectual, but Nannie, with a flash of intuition, understood the thought that prompted them. She took a step forward, looking at the two ladies with her patient, soft eyes, and spoke very simply.

"Mr. Rostron did not love me," she said. "We were friends—only friends—do you believe that—can you think so ill of him?"

Lady Rostron's faint colour deepened, and she dropped her eyes. Then she rose, without another word, and signed to the pearl stringer to follow her.

Slowly they mounted the wide staircase, where there was a perfume of flowers, growing stronger as they neared the closed door of the room where the dead man lay.

Lady Rostron opened the door very gently, as if he were only asleep.

The corners of the room were in darkness, but Nannie saw the glimmer of lighted candles. One of the curtains had slipped a little open and a long shaft of sunshine fell across the floor.

Lady Rostron stood still with her eyes on the girl.

Nannie, her hands clasped to her beating heart, crossed the room quickly and stood beside him. She forgot the presence of the other woman.

She looked down, without tears, on the face of the man whom she had loved, secretly and devotedly, for so long.

Death, in the resignation of her heart, lost its

sting and the grave lost its victory. She did not wish him back. He had fallen asleep after the long, hard day that we call Life.

His face was very beautiful in its still solemnity; he looked younger than she had ever seen him look—like the man in her dream, walking through the field of waving corn.

Nannie knelt down by his side. She began to cry, softly, noiselessly, with her hands clasped on the white sheet that covered him, her face on a level with his, and she murmured the few words of a last farewell.

She did not move for several minutes. The slanting ray of sunshine fell across his feet. She rose, very quietly, and touched his hands with both of her own. Then she turned to Lady Rostron.

"Now I will go away," she said.

Lady Rostron passed out of the room first. Nannie looked at him once again, as she stood in the doorway. Her lips moved in a silent prayer—a wordless blessing—and so she left him.

CHAPTER XXV

BRIGHTLY the fire glowed and crackled, little flames dancing and leaping round a block of spluttering wood. There was the splash of rain against the windows, but the drawn curtains kept out the gloom and dreariness of a winter night.

The walls of the room were still gay with evergreens and Christmas holly and mistletoe, although the New Year was nearly a month old.

Three great shadows spread themselves from wainscot to ceiling, often merging into one another, as the three people round the hearth drew closely together, talking and laughing.

Rose Challis, Solomon, and Nannie Mordaunt were roasting chestnuts in the drawing-room of the house in Bayswater.

Rose was in charge of the salt and a knife to nick the nuts, Nannie held the responsible post of placing some between the bars of the grate, and shaking others in the shovel. Solomon advised and directed.

"These are the very best chestnuts out of Mr. Tapping's shop," said Rose. "He gave Olly a basket of them for a New Year's gift."

"Good ol' Mr. Tappin'!" observed Solomon.

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Olly 'Ooper had recently announced her engagement to a prosperous young greengrocer of that name.

"Do you think she will really have him? Is it serious at last?" asked the pearl stringer, smiling.

"Yes, I am sure it is," answered Rose. "They hope to be married in the spring. I'm very glad, but we shall miss our Olly——"

"Don't burn 'em, Nannie dear!" put in Old Sol, jumping from one foot to the other in his anxiety.

"We shall miss our Olly," repeated his mother. "I don't want any change at all in this house, unless—some day perhaps—Old Sol's little sister appears upon the scene."

She laughed, a soft, happy laugh, and passed her hand over her boy's hair.

"What a strange thing for you to say, Rose!" exclaimed her friend. "There was a time when you always wanted change."

"Ah, there was a time——" began Rose, and stopped abruptly, as if she could not, or would not, put her thoughts into words.

She forgot her duties with the knife, and stooping forward, her cheek cupped in her hand, looked into the glowing hollow of the fire.

A few short months had wrought a change, the forerunner of many changes, in Rose Challis.

The freshness of her beauty remained, but it was of a different quality, more developed and matured; something lost of its wild, alluring charm, but much gained in its gentleness and promise.

Rose's face would always mirror her quick,

responsive moods. Nannie Mordaunt, on the contrary, looked the same, and felt the same, through the long days and short years of her life. Old Father Time would be merciful to the little pearl stringer, drawing only faint lines with his cunning hand, making her eyes more sweet and winning as their colour faded, and touching her hair with the softest snows.

Some thought such as this passed through Rose's mind as she turned her eyes on her friend. She wondered whether Nannie had ever wept the bitter tears of sorrow and remorse, had ever known the illusion and the reality of love, had ever dared a courageous deed.

"When I'm a man," announced Old Sol, in a loud voice, "I shall live in the place where the chestnuts grow."

"Why, they grow in England, Solly," said his mother.

"Then I don't think we 'preciate England," said Old Sol.

His companions laughed. Olly 'Ooper had taught him the word appreciate.

"I feel there is unconscious wisdom in Old Sol's remark," said Rose, glancing at Nannie. "There are so many things I do not 'preciate."

"For instance?" said Nannie.

"For instance—Mr. Challis."

She coloured a little, smiled, and carefully nicked some more of the chestnuts.

"I am glad you have found it out," observed Nannie.

"Oh, I found it out years ago!" Rose replied.

"But that isn't the point, Nan. We can all learn to appreciate, but the great thing is to love."

Then the little boy sat down on the hearthrug, cross-legged, and Nannie divided the chestnuts. The three shadows on the wall turned into one gigantic shadow. The log of wood fell apart, scattering white ashes into the heart of the fire.

Nannie and her friend talked of Perth's growing success; of Pill's approaching marriage with a dear little dancer—"the only girl he had ever loved!"—of Mrs. Leonard's pride in a pantomime engagement; of the lengthy book that Professor Mordaunt intended to write some day on the subject of legerdemain by a master of the art; of Nannie's work, and of the silent aunt.

When Solomon had gone away, to share the last of the chestnuts with Olly 'Ooper, they fell into silence. Rose still looked into the fire, and Nannie watched her, musingly. They were both thinking of the past year.

Suddenly Rose stretched out her arm and drew her friend closer. Nannie leaned against her knees.

"Nan dear! I want to talk to you, freely and frankly, but I am afraid you will not understand. It will sound so exaggerated, so extravagant, if I try to tell you of my love—for him. Every day and every hour it deepens and intensifies. Oh, Sydney! Sydney!"

The low, thrilling voice trembled and broke on her husband's name. There was silence once more, except for the murmur of Nannie's sympathy.

"Nan, this is what I want to tell you. I must tell you!" she went on; "I have kept it to myself too long. My life is shadowed by the memory of the past. If he knew, if he only knew, that I had wavered in my loyalty, that I had listened to Eugene Milrake—loved Eugene Milrake—Nannie! Nannie! Would he forgive me? Would he believe that even then, in all my weakness, he held a sacred place in my heart? Would he trust me? Would he still love me, as he loves me now?"

Her old friend, still looking into the beautiful, agitated face, did not answer.

"Nannie! Eugene pursued me for many months," she went on, in a low voice. "I could not escape from him. He was here—here in our house on the day before Sydney returned. You remember? It was the day when Mr. Rostron died."

"I remember," whispered Nannie.

"Sydney came home. He was so happy to come home. So kind, so good, so dear! But if he had known, Nannie, if he had known!"

The pearl stringer drew herself away from Rose's convulsive grasp. She looked steadily and fearlessly into her eyes.

"Your husband knew!" she said. "I had told him. Listen!"

Quietly, simply, without a tremor, she described the night when she had seen, through the uncurtained window, Eugene Milrake alone with Rose. She described her secret journey to the Midlands to speak with Sydney Challis, and how they had returned, immediately, together.

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Rose, in utter amazement, hung upon her words. She was not angry with Nannie Mordaunt, but marvelled at her great courage.

"What did you tell my husband?" she asked.

"I only told him you were unhappy and you wanted him. I had judged him rightly. He understood."

"Did you speak of Eugene Milrake?"

"Yes! Rose, I can't tell you everything I said, but I was true to our old friendship. Indeed, indeed I was true to that."

"I believe you, Nannie."

"Do you forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive. The shadow is lifted from my life."

She stooped forward and kissed her friend, not with the old effusion, but tenderly, solemnly, in speechless gratitude.

Rose, an hour later, softly opened the door of the waiting-room. She knew that Challis was there, and guessed, rightly, that he had thrown himself on the couch and fallen asleep.

An open book and a child's toy—for Solomon had been playing in the room—were lying on the floor at his side.

The couch was low and close to the fire. Rose stooped over him. How quietly he slept! She watched the lift and fall of his big chest, and studied his serene face.

"Sydney!"

He stirred when she spoke his name for the second time, opened his eyes slowly, and smiled at her.

"I was dreaming about you, my dear," he said, "you and Old Sol, but I don't remember anything about it."

Rose sat down on the edge of the couch. Still lazily, only half awake, he put his arm round her.

"I have been talking to Nannie Mordaunt," she said.

"Yes? Where is our Nannie?" asked Mr. Challis.

"She has just gone home. Sydney! She told me about her journey to the Midlands, in the autumn. She told me—everything."

His laziness was gone. He pulled himself up and sat beside her. She could not read his expression.

"Well, Rose? Well?" was all he answered.

"Why did you come back so quickly?" she cried. "Why didn't you trust me? I had sent him away—Eugene Milrake—Sydney! I had sent him away."

"Hush! Hush! I believe you. I trust you. I have always trusted you. There! Don't cry."

"Why did you come back so quickly?" she repeated. "On that night when Nannie saw us together, I realised, for the first time, his utter falsehood and treachery. Sydney! Let me speak!"

He had tried to stop her, but now he folded his arms and looked at her earnestly.

"For weeks, Sydney, he had not spoken a word that you or I could have resented. On that night, in the little sewing-room, he made me talk of the old days when we were young lovers, and

gradually, cunningly, linked the past with the present. It must have been then that Nannie Mordaunt saw us through the window. Sydney! Can I make you understand? As the man talked to me, as I looked into his eyes, slowly, slowly a veil seemed to be lifted. I saw Eugene—and I saw myself!"

Her voice had sunk into a clear whisper; her hands were clenched, and her face looked as it had looked, set and drawn, on the night that she recalled.

"I saw that my old passion was dead. It passed away—away—in the realisation of the love of my life, the love of you. I saw Eugene as a shadow, indefinite, terrible, across my path. I saw into the depths of his base heart. I heard him woo me to hidden treachery. I heard him propose to ruin my peace, to desecrate my home—in secret. Then he spoke your name for the first time. He insulted you, my husband, and a flame leapt up within me. It burnt me clean. I do not know what I said to him, but I drove him out—I drove him out of our house, for ever!"

She fell into her husband's arms, she hung upon his neck, she clung to him, and lifted her tear-drenched face and kissed his lips.

"Rose," he said, "I never doubted you, dear heart! I have reproached myself, often and bitterly, for marrying you, but I thought you loved me."

"As I love you now!"

"If any suspicion ever passed through my mind—you know what a staid, commonplace man I am

—I put it aside, firmly, rigidly, as some men put aside their religious doubts, for my love for you was like a religion. You were my wife. I honoured you. I knew you—pure gold !”

The wildness of her grief passed away. She lifted her head from his breast and saw him, as on the night when he first told her of his love, transfigured by his goodness and truth.

“As for Eugene Milrake,” he went on, with no anger in his grave, tolerant voice ; “as for Eugene, he must work out his own salvation. We shall never see him again. When Nannie Mordaunt came to me—dear girl ! loyal friend ! —I only knew that you were unhappy, I only knew that this man was pestering you. That was the reason of my quick return. I meant to do the thing that you had already done. I meant to rid our house of him. No more, no less. Rose, I say it again, I never doubted you. I love you too much, my dear, too much——”

Happy, with a deep happiness they had never known before ; soothed and healed by their knowledge of each other ; uplifted by the dawning of a wider faith in the noble purposes and dreams of life—Rose Challis and her husband reached, and held, the radiant hour of the Present and the Future.

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The rain pours down as the little pearl stringer, light of foot, slips home through the dreary streets.

She is happy in her simple work ; cherished by

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the few who know her; softened, but not embittered, by the story of her secret love.

"The scattered hours I have spent with you are pearls on the thread of life."

She hears the echo of Rostron's words, and believes, in her gentle heart, some day they will meet again.

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